

The Widow's Mite

By Isaac K. Funk

In the early part of February, 1903, having heard of a woman in Brooklyn, who every Wednesday evening gave spiritualistic "sittings" to her family and a few invited guests, I requested a mutual friend of the family and myself, Mr. Irving S. Roney, a gentleman who has long been in the employment of Funk & Wagnalls Company, and who has the confidence of us all, to secure for me an invitation to attend several of these meetings. I found the family plain, intelligent folks, in humble circumstances; the medium a delicate lady of sixty-eight years, of little school education, refined manners. The family is composed of this lady, a son of thirty-five years of age, and a brother of fifty-eight years. The woman is a widow, and the brother a widower whose three children died many years ago. The controls report themselves to be three in number; a daughter of this brother by the name of Mamie, died at the age of seven, and a friend of one in the circle by the name of George Carroll, and a son of the medium by the name of Amos.

The sittings are a kind of prayer-meeting, a weekly reunion of the family, "living and dead," and have so been held, I am told, every Wednesday for over four years. No charge of any sort whatever is made, nor is there any collection taken. The communications are believed to be by direct or independent speech and by raps, with lights occasionally appearing on the curtains. The medium says that she knows nothing whatever of what takes place during the sittings, being lost in trance. The voices are of a great variety; I counted in a single evening as many as twenty—some apparently the voices of children, and others of middle-aged persons and of old men and women, a few of these are the voices of Indians, and one of a jolly, typical Virginian negro. Each voice maintains its individuality during the evening and from one evening to another. Listening very closely, I was never able to detect any confusion of the voices, except on one occasion in the voices of Mamie and the negro, Aunt Eliza. When attention was drawn to this, Aunt Eliza explained that she and Mamie were much of the time together, and that she sometimes fell into the habit of talking "like them folks I like." This explanation fitted in with the theory that I was inclined to adopt from the first, that the membership in this circle was an excellent case of secondary personality, not of spirit control. The brother and son of the medium were always at the circle and in sight, so that there was no collusion possible on the part of any of these members of the family.

The medium at these sittings sat behind a curtain in the dark. A dim light in a corner of the room in which we sat, controlled from the cabinet, made objects about us faintly visible—by it with a little straining of my eyes I could tell the time by my watch. The bedroom in which sat the medium opened into the kitchen. The conditions were not at all of a test kind. It was all "upon honor." After considerable investigation, however, and fuller acquaintance with the family, I am morally certain that this confidence in the integrity of the medium and family at the time of this mite incident was not misplaced. The greater part of the communications claim to come from departed members of the family, especially to the brother; this brother is a man of hard common sense, who seems much affected by the communications, especially those purporting to come from his little seven-year-old daughter and from his deceased wife. In addition to the above facts, the absence of any apparent advantage to the medium or her family that would come from any

trick, as no effort, up to the time of my visit, was made to secure sitters, and no money directly or indirectly given, make it hard to think that there is any intended deception.

The conclusion that this mediumship was a remarkably good case of secondary personality was almost fixed in my mind, up to the time that I had the singular experience which I give below.

On my third visit I was quite tired, and sat rather quietly during the entire evening listening to the talk between the cabinet and the sitters—of the sitters there were fewer than a dozen. About eleven o'clock the control named "George," in his usual strong masculine voice, abruptly asked: "Has any one here got anything that belonged to Mr. Beecher?"

There was no reply. On his emphatic repetition of the question, I replied, being the only one present, as I felt sure, who had ever had any immediate acquaintance with Mr. Beecher:

"I have in my pocket a letter from Rev. Dr. Hillis, Mr. Beecher's successor. Is that what you mean?"

The answer was: "No; I am told by a spirit present, John Rakestraw, that Mr. Beecher, who is not present, is concerned about an ancient coin, 'The Widow's Mite.' This coin is out of its place, and should be returned. It has long been away, and Mr. Beecher wishes it returned, and he looks to *you*, doctor, to return it.

I was considerably surprised, and asked: "What do you mean by saying that he looks to me to return it? I have no coin of Mr. Beecher's!"

"I don't know anything about it except that I am told that this coin is out of its place, and has been for a number of years, and that Mr. Beecher says *you* can find it and can return it."

I remembered then that when we were making "The Standard Dictionary," some nine years before, I had borrowed from a gentleman in Brooklyn—a close friend of Mr. Beecher's, who died several years ago—a valuable, ancient coin known as "The Widow's Mite." He told me that this coin was worth some hundreds of dollars, and, under promise that I would see that it was returned to the collection where it belonged, he would loan it to me. Although a member of Dr. Richard S. Storrs's church, this gentleman remained a conspicuous friend of Mr. Beecher all through the famous trial which so severely tested the loyalty of many of Mr. Beecher's friends.

I said to the control, "The only 'Widow's Mite' that has ever been in my charge was one that I borrowed some years ago from a gentleman in Brooklyn; this I promptly returned." To which the control replied:

"This one has *not* been returned." And then, after a moment's silence, he said: "Do you know whether there is a large iron safe in Plymouth Church?"

I answered, "I do not."

He said: "I am impressed that this coin is in a large iron safe, that it has been lost sight of; it is in a drawer in this safe under a lot of papers, and that you can find it, and Mr. Beecher wishes you to find it."

I said: "Do you mean that this safe is in Plymouth Church?"

He said: "I don't know where it is. I am simply impressed that it is in a large iron safe in a drawer, under a lot of papers, and has been lost sight of for years, and that you can find it, and Mr. Beecher wishes you to find it. That is all that I can tell you."

The next day when I went to New York, I thought over this curious communication about "The Widow's Mite." I was certain the coin had been returned, but the insistent statement that it had not been returned, and the curious fact that such an unusual piece of money should have been so positively mentioned, all impressed me very strongly. During the day, my brother, who had been the business manager of "The Standard Dictionary," called at my editorial rooms. I asked him, without telling him anything of the incident of the night before, if he remembered "The Widow's

Mite” which we had used in the illustration of the dictionary. He said that he did, and, in reply to my question as to what he had done with it, he replied, “I returned it.”

“To whom?” I asked.

He said: “I don’t know the man, but I returned it to the person from whom you said you had borrowed it.”

To my cross-examination he repeated again and again that he was certain that it had been returned.

In the afternoon, at our business conference, Mr. Wagnalls, the vice-president of our company, and Mr. E. J. Wheeler, the editor of *The Literary Digest*, being present, I told them of my curious experience.

Mr. Wagnalls said: “I never heard that you had borrowed such a coin.”

Mr. Wheeler, who is particularly skeptical of “spirit communications,” playfully remarked:

“Well, now find that coin, and it will be a good test.”

I said, half-jestingly, “All right”; and, tapping the bell, called in the cashier and asked him: “Do you remember an old coin called ‘The Widow’s Mite’ which was in our possession during the making of the dictionary?”

He replied that he did, that it was given to him by Mr. B. F. Funk, and he was under the impression that it had been returned to its owner.

I asked: “Are you sure of this?”

He said: “I believe it has been so returned.”

I told him to go to the large iron safe (we have two safes in the cashier’s office), and have his assistants help him see whether that coin was anywhere in the safe. In about twenty minutes one of his assistants came into the office, and handed me an envelope in which were *two* “Widow’s Mites.” The envelope had been found *in a little drawer in the large iron safe under a lot of papers, where it had lain forgotten for a number of years.*

In examining the two coins and also the plate of illustrations in the dictionary, it was found that we had used for reproduction the smaller and lighter colored one. The other was much blacker. I concluded that the light one was the genuine widow’s mite, for I remembered that we had sent both to the curator of the Philadelphia Mint, who was an expert on ancient coins, and had asked him kindly to let us know which of the two was genuine. I instructed Mr. B. F. Funk, the business manager of the Dictionary Department, to follow the information of this expert in making the coin-plate, and up to the time of this interview with the control, I had thought that this instruction had been carried out. We determined at once to make further test of this curious intelligence, by seeing whether the control could tell which of the two coins should be returned. So we agreed to keep the whole matter to ourselves, not telling even the cashier our reason for the inquiry.

On the following Wednesday evening I attended the same Brooklyn circle.

Toward the close of the séance “George” began talking. I said to him: “George, you remember the request you made of me, last Wednesday evening?”

He at once replied: “Yes, about the coin, the widow’s mite?”

“There are two of them. Now, George, can you tell me which of the two is the right one?”

Without an instant’s hesitation he answered:

“The black one.”

I was certain that the *lighter* one was the correct coin, as that was the one we had used in the dictionary. I asked him whether he was sure that it was the black one. His reply was instant: “Certainly.” Then I asked whether he could tell me to whom it was to be returned. He said that

he could not tell, but he thought it was to be returned to some place in Connecticut, but he did not know for sure. I asked him whether he could tell me from whom I had received it. He said that it belonged to some friend of Mr. Beecher's. I wished to know what friend, if he could not give me the name. He said that he could not, but that he was shown a picture of a college, that he did not know what this meant, unless that this man had been connected with a large school.

I said: "Where located?"

"In Brooklyn."

"What part of Brooklyn?"

"On the Heights."

"A gentlemen's school, or a ladies' school?"

"A ladies' school."

This information about the owner of "The Widow's Mite" was all correct as far as it went, for the gentleman from whom I had got it was Prof. Charles E. West, who was, at the time, that I had borrowed the coin, and had been for many years, at the head of a ladies' high school on the Brooklyn Heights. But the curious thing was that so much could be told of the details, and yet the name of the owner of the coin could not be given, nor could I be told with any certainty where Mr. Beecher desired the coin, to be sent. The answer to my repeated questions on these two points was at this sitting and two future sittings:

"I cannot tell you; I do not know; for some reason Mr. Beecher does not tell."

At a circle with another medium the following week, I asked these same two questions of Mr. Beecher, who was said to be present. I was told by the control that Mr. Beecher said that he was not concerned about the return of the coin; what he was concerned about was to give me a test that would prove the certainty of communication between the two worlds, and since that had been accomplished in my finding the coin, he cared nothing further about it. In the conversation at this second circle I had spoken of the finding of a coin through another medium. This clew vitiated somewhat the evidential value of this later interview as a test.

After receiving the surprising answer from the control, George, that it was "the black coin" which was the correct one, I sent both coins again to the Philadelphia Mint, without giving them any indication or clew of what had taken place, simply requesting to know which of the two coins was the genuine "Widow's Mite." The reply that came back was, in part:

"The second and smaller piece is evidently a *copy*, made at a comparatively recent date, of a coin representing a somewhat later date than the first piece."

It was the second and smaller coin that we had used by mistake in the dictionary. The larger is the black coin and the one we should have used, and which we have ordered on the above information to be substituted in the dictionary plate in the next edition.

The envelope containing the two coins when found was sealed, and on it were written these words:

"Mr. Raymond. The widow's mite—please put in vault for safe-keeping, Value \$125. (Signed) B. F.

"This envelope contains two widow's mites—shekel, half shekel, and denarius."

Nothing else was written on the envelope, but in the preface to the dictionary there is this statement, speaking of the illustrations: "The Widow's Mite (which was engraved from an excellent original coin in the possession of Prof. Charles E. West of Brooklyn, N. Y.)."

Unfortunately, few people read the preface to a dictionary. Mr. Roney and even Mr. Wagnalls cannot remember to have ever read this statement in the preface. Mr. Roney was the only person besides myself in the circle, who was likely to know of my connection with this "Widow's Mite." Mr. Roney is one of the most truthful men I have ever met—in my judgment incapable of falsehood or trick. I have his sworn affidavit, and add that Mr. Roney never has anything to do with the safes in the cashier's department, and that there is not the least likelihood that he could have known of the fact of this coin's presence in the safe—a fact unknown to myself, and unremembered by the cashiers. No one is allowed access to these safes except the officers of the company and the cashiers.

The medium has since sent me a most sweeping and solemn written statement that she knew nothing whatever of my connection with this coin, and that she had no knowledge that there ever existed in Brooklyn such a man as Professor West.

In a signed statement from Mr. B. F. Funk, he says:

"I was absolutely certain that the coin had been returned to its owner, having instructed the Cashier's Department, in 1893, so to return it; and had never heard nor thought about that coin, from that time up to the day that Dr. Funk told me of the strange request from the so-called spirit control.

"How the mistake was made in making for the dictionary a copy of the wrong coin, I am wholly at a loss to understand, as it was my intention to follow the instructions of the curator at the Philadelphia Mint, and thought I had so followed; but I now see that a mistake in some unaccountable way was made. Not being a Spiritualist, the entire incident has greatly puzzled me."

Among other documents substantiating this story is a letter from an attorney, Mr. Charles W. West; which reads as follows:

"As sole executor of the estate of the late Dr. Charles E. West, I beg to acknowledge receipt from you this day of the copper coin known as 'The Widow's Mite,' which many years since was loaned by Dr. West to you for the purpose of use in illustrating the plate of coins contained in Funk & Wagnalls Dictionary; and I wish to add, that so far as I can be certain of anything that passed in my father's mind since his loan of this article, I am sure that he supposed that it had been returned by you to him, as you until of late supposed you had returned it.

"As executor of my father's estate, I felt so certain that this coin had been returned, that it never occurred to me to make inquiry of you whether it was in your possession. The extraordinary method by which your possession of it was divulged has made a strong impression upon my mind, as it must upon all who have become acquainted with the facts; and I can assure you now that my intention is to preserve the coin in the family, associated as it is with the very extraordinary occurrences leading to your delivery of it to me, so long as that family shall continue to exist.

Mr. West assures me that no other member of his father's family knew of the loan of this coin, or of its absence from its place in the collection.

It should also be mentioned that the elder Mr. West and I were members of the same club, and dined together probably not fewer than fifty times, from 1893 up to the time of his death. This fact, and the fact that he did not in all these years speak to me of the coin, shows how completely he had forgotten about my having it. The son informs me that after his father's death he, as administrator, sold the coin collection for some \$17,000, and that he does not know its present possessor. He also says that he and his father valued the coin at \$2,500.