

Mrs. Davenport's Ghost

By Frederick F. Schrader

Dear readers, do you agree with Hamlet? Do you believe that there is more between heaven and earth than we dream of in our philosophy? Does it seem possible to you that Eliphas Levy conjured up the shade of Apollonius of Tyana, the prophet of the Magii, in a London hotel, and that the great sage, William Crookes, drank his tea at breakfast several days a week, for months in succession, in the society of the materialized spirit of a young lady, attired in white linen, with a feather turban on her head?

Do not laugh! Panic would seize you in the presence even of a turbaned spirit, and the grotesque spectacle would but intensify your terror. As for me, I did not laugh last night on reading an account in a New York newspaper of a criminal trial that will probably terminate in the death penalty of the accused.

It is a sad case. I shudder as I transcribe the records of the trial from the testimony of the hotel waiter, who heard the conversation of the two confederates through a keyhole, and of forty thoroughly credible witnesses, who testified to the same facts. What would be my feelings if I had seen the beautiful victim with the gaping wound in her breast, into which she dipped her finger to mark the brow of her murderer?

I.

About three o'clock on the afternoon of February 3, Professor Davenport and Miss Ida Soutchotte, a very pale and delicate young girl, who had submitted to the tests of Professor Davenport for a number of years, were finishing their dinner in their room in the second story of a New York hotel. Professor Benjamin Davenport was a celebrity, but it was said that he owed his fame to somewhat questionable means. The leading spiritualists did not repose the confidence in him that manifestly marked their regard for William Crookes or Daniel Douglas Home.

"Greedy and unscrupulous mediums," the author of *Spiritualism in America* thinks, "are to blame for the most bitter attacks to which our cause has been exposed. When the materializations do not take place as quickly as circumstances require, they resort to trickery and fraud to extricate themselves from a dilemma.

Professor Benjamin Davenport belonged to these "versatile" mediums. Aside from this, queer stories were afloat about him. He was secretly accused of highway robbery in South America, cheating at cards in the gambling houses of San Francisco, and the overhasty use of firearms toward persons who had never offended him. It was said almost openly, that the professor's wife had died from abuse and grief at his infidelity. But in spite of these annoying rumors, Mr. Davenport, by virtue of his skill as a fraud and fakir, continued to exercise a great deal of influence upon certain plain and simpleminded folks, whom it was impossible to convince that they had not touched the materialized spirits of their brothers, mothers, or sisters through the agency of his wonderful power. His professional success received material accession from his swarthy, Mephisto-like countenance, his deep, fiery eyes, his large curved nose, the cynical expression of his mouth, and the lofty, almost prophetic tone of his words.

When the waiter had made his last visit—he did not go far—the following conversation took place in the room:

“There is to be a seance this evening at the residence of Mrs. Harding,” began the medium. “Quite a number of influential people will be there, and two or three millionaires. Conceal under your skirt the blonde woman’s wig and the white material in which the spirits usually make their appearance.”

“Very well,” replied Ida Soutchotte, in a resigned tone.

The waiter heard her pace the room. After a pause, she asked:

“Whose spirit are you going to control this evening, Benjamin?”

The waiter heard a loud, brutal laugh and the chair groaning beneath the weight of the demonstrative professor.

“Guess.”

“How should I know?” she asked.

“I am going to conjure up the spirit of my dead wife.”

And another burst of laughter issued from the room, full of sinister levity. A cry of terror burst from Ida’s Imps. A muffled sound indicated to the eavesdropper at the door that she was dragging herself to the feet of the professor.

“Benjamin, Benjamin! don’t do it,” she sobbed.

“Why not? They say I broke Mrs. Davenport’s heart. The story is damaging my reputation, but it will be forgotten if her spirit should address me in terms of endearment from the other shore in the presence of numerous witnesses. For you will speak to me tenderly, will you not, Ida?”

“No, no. You shall not do it; you shall not think of it. Listen to me, for God’s sake. During the four years that I have been with you I have obeyed you faithfully and suffered patiently. I have lied and deceived, like you; I learned to imitate the sleep and symptoms of clairvoyants. Tell me, did I ever refuse to serve you, or utter a word of complaint, even when my shoulders bent with the weight of my burden, when you pierced the flesh of my arms with knitting needles? Worse than all this, I imitated distant voices behind curtains, and made mothers and wives believe that their sons and husbands had come from a better world to communicate with them. How often have I performed the most dangerous feats in parlors with the lamps turned low? Clothed in a shroud or white muslin I essayed to represent supernatural forms, whom tear-dimmed eyes recognized as those of departed dear ones. You do not know what I suffered at this unhallowed work. You scoff at the mysteries of eternity. I suffer the torments of an impending retribution. My God! if some time the dead whom I counterfeit should rise up before me with uplifted arms and dreadful imprecations! This constant terror has injured my heart—it will kill me. I am consumed by fever. Look how emaciated, how worn-out and downcast I am. But I am under your control. Do as you like with me; I am in your power, and I want it to be so. Have I ever complained? But do not force me to do this thing, Benjamin. Have pity on me for what I have done for you in the past, for what I am suffering. Do not attempt this mummery; do not compel me to play the role of your dead wife, who was so tender and beautiful. Oh, what put that thought into your mind? Spare me, Benjamin, I implore you!”

The professor did not laugh again. Amid the confusion of upturned articles of furniture the eavesdropper distinguished the sound of a skull striking the floor. He concluded that Professor Davenport had knocked Miss Ida down with a blow of his fist, or had kicked her as she approached him. But the waiter did not enter the room, as no one rang for him.

That evening forty persons were assembled in Mrs. Joanne Harding's parlor, staring at the curtain where a spirit form was in process of materializing. One dark lantern in a corner of the room contributed the light that emphasized the darkness rather than relieved it. The room was pervaded by profound silence, save the quickened, suppressed breathing of the spectators. The fire in the grate cast mysterious rays of light, resembling fugitive spirits, upon the objects around, almost indistinguishable in the semi-gloom.

Professor Davenport was at his best this evening. The spirit world obeyed him without hesitation, like their lawful master. He was the mighty prince of souls. Hands that had no arms were seen picking flowers from the vases; the touch of an invisible spirit conjured sweet melodies from the keys of the piano; the furniture responded by intelligent rappings to the most unanticipated questions. The professor himself elevated his form in symbolical distortions from the floor to an altitude of three feet, indicated by Mrs. Harding, and remained suspended in the air for a quarter of an hour, holding live coals in his hands.

III.

But the most interesting, as well as the most conclusive, test was to be the materialization of the spirit of Mrs. Arabella Davenport, which the professor had promised at the beginning of the seance.

"The hour has come, exclaimed the medium. And while the hearts of all throbbed with anxious suspense, and their eyes distended with painful expectancy of the promised materialization, Benjamin Davenport stood before the curtain. In the twilight the tall man with the disheveled hair and demon look, was really terrible and handsome.

"Appear, Arabella!" he exclaimed, in a commanding voice, with gestures of the Nazarene at the sepulcher of Lazarus.

All are waiting—

Suddenly a cry burst from behind the curtain—a piercing, shuddering, horrible shriek, the shriek of an expiring soul.

The spectators trembled. Mrs. Harding almost fainted. The medium himself appeared surprised.

But Benjamin recovered his composure on seeing the curtain move and admit the spirit.

The apparition was that of a young woman with long blonde tresses; she was beautiful and pale, clad in some light, whitish material. Her breast was bare, and on the left side appeared a bleeding wound, in which trembled a knife.

The spectators arose and retreated, pushing their chairs to the wall. Those who chanced to look at the medium noticed that a deathly pallor had overspread his face, and that he was cowering and trembling.

But the young woman, Mrs. Arabella, the real one, whom he so well remembered, she had come in response to his summons, and advanced in a direct line toward Benjamin, who in terror covered his eyes to shut out the ghastly sight, and with a cry fled behind the furniture. But she dipped the finger of her thin hand into the blood from her wound and traced it across the brow of the unconscious medium, the while repeating, in a slow, monotonous tone that sounded like the echo of a wail, again and again:

"You are my murderer! You are my murderer!"

And while he was rolling and tossing in deadly terror on the floor they turned up the lights.

The spirit had vanished. But in the communicating room, behind the curtain, they found the body of poor Miss Ida Soutchotte with horribly distorted features. A physician who was present pronounced it heart stroke.

And that is the reason that Prof. Benjamin Davenport appeared alone in a New York courtroom to answer to the charge of having murdered his wife four years ago in San Francisco.