

THE WATSEKA WONDER

Lurancy Vennum's Metamorphosis and Its Explanation

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Drawing by Joseph Clement Coll



WHEN the biography of the late Richard Hodgson is written, one of its most interesting chapters will be the story of his investigation into the strange case of Lurancy Vennum, as archinquisitor of the Society for Psychical Research, the Sherlock Holmes of professional detectives of the supernatural. In this instance Hodgson was forced to confess himself beaten and to acknowledge that in his belief the only satisfactory solution of the problem before him was to be had through recourse to the hypothesis that the dead can and do communicate with the living.

As is well known, subsequent inquiries, and notably his experiences with the famous Mrs. Piper, led him to the enthusiastic indorsement of this hypothesis; but at the time of the Vennum affair, with the recollection of his triumphs in Europe and Asia fresh in his mind, he was still a thoroughgoing if open minded skeptic; and to Lurancy Vennum must accordingly be given the credit of having brought him, so to speak, to the turning of the ways. Oddly enough too, scarcely an effort has been made to assemble evidence in disproof of his findings in that case and to develop a purely naturalistic explanation of a mystery that his verdict went far to establish in the minds of many as a classic illustration of supernatural action. Yet, while it must be admitted that until recently such a task would have been extremely difficult, it may safely be declared that the phenomena manifested through Lurancy Vennum were not a whit more other-worldly than the phenomena produced by the tricksters whom Hodgson himself so skillfully and mercilessly exposed.

Lurancy's First Spiritual Visit

To refresh the reader's memory with regard to the facts in the case, it will be recalled that Lurancy Vennum was a young girl, between thirteen and fourteen years old, the daughter of respectable parents living at Watseka, Illinois, a town about eighty-five miles south of Chicago, and boasting at the time a population of perhaps fifteen hundred. On the afternoon of July 11, 1877, while sitting sewing with her mother, she suddenly complained of feeling ill, and immediately afterward fell to the floor unconscious, in which state she remained for five hours. The next day the same thing happened; but now, while still apparently insensible to all about her, she began to talk, affirming that she was in heaven and in the company of numerous "spirits," whom she described, naming among others the "spirit" of her brother, who had died when she was only three years old.

Her parents, deeply religious people of an orthodox denomination, feared that she had become insane, and their fears were increased when, with the passage of time, her "fits," as they called her trances, became more frequent and of longer duration, lasting from one to eight hours and occurring from three to twelve times a day. Physicians could do nothing for her, and by January, 1878, it was decided that she was beyond all hope of

entirely sound mind, and he was equally confident that the present victim of "spirit infestation," to use the singular term employed by a later spiritualistic eulogist of Lurancy, was also of sound mind. He therefore begged Vennum not to immure his daughter in an asylum; and, Mrs. Roff adding her entreaties, it was finally resolved as a last resort to call in a physician from Janesville, Wisconsin, who was himself a spiritualist and would, the Roffs felt sure, be able to treat the case with great success.

A Queer Dialogue

THIS physician, Dr. E. Winchester Stevens, paid his first visit to Lurancy in Roff's company on the afternoon of January 31. He found the girl, as he afterward related, sitting "near a stove, in a common chair, her elbows on her knees, her hands under her chin, feet curled up on the chair, eyes staring, looking every way like an old hag." She was evidently in an ugly mood; for she refused even to shake hands, called her father "Old Black Dick" and her mother "Old Granny," and at first kept an obstinate silence. But presently, brightening up, she announced that she had discovered that Dr. Stevens was a "spiritual" doctor and could help her, and that she was ready to answer any questions he might put.

Now followed a strange dialogue. In reply to his queries, she said that her name was not Lurancy Vennum, but Katrina Hogan; that she was sixty-three years old, and had come from Germany "through the air" three days before. Changing her manner quickly, she confessed that she had lied and was in reality a boy, Willie Canning, who had died, and "now is here because he wants to be." More than an hour passed in this "insane talk," as her weeping parents accounted it, and then, flinging up her hands, she fell headlong into a state of cataleptic rigidity.

Dr. Stevens promptly renewed his questioning, at the same time taking both her hands in his and endeavoring to "magnetize" her, to quote his own expression. It soon developed, according to the replies she made, that she was no longer on earth, but in heaven, and surrounded by "spirits" of a far more beneficent character than the so called Katrina and Willie. With all the earnestness of an ardent spiritualist, the doctor immediately suggested that she allow herself to be controlled by a "spirit" that would prevent those who were evil and insane from returning to trouble her and her family, and would assist her to regain health. To which she answered that she would gladly do so, and that among the "spirits" around her was one whom the angels strongly recommended for this very purpose. It was, she said, the "spirit" of a young girl who on earth had been named Mary Roff.

"Why," cried Roff, "that is my daughter, who has been in heaven these twelve years! Yes, let her come. We'll be glad to have her come."

And Mary Came

COME she did, as the greatly bewildered Vennum testified next morning during a hasty visit to Roff's office. "My girl," said he, "had a sound night's sleep after you and Dr. Stevens left us; but to-day she asserts that she is Mary Roff, refuses to

recognize her mother or myself, and demands to be taken to your house."

At this amazing information, Mrs. Roff and her surviving daughter Minerva, who since Mary's death had married a Mr. Alter, promptly went to see Lurancy. From a seat at the window she beheld them approaching down the street, and with an exultant cry exclaimed, "Here come my ma and Nerville!" the name by which Mary Roff had been accustomed to call her sister in girlhood. Running to the door and throwing her arms about them as they entered, she hugged and kissed them, with expressions of endearment, and with whispering allusions to past events of which she as Lurancy could in their opinion have had absolutely no knowledge.

Roff, who came afterward, she greeted in the same affectionate way, while treating the members of her own family as though they were entire strangers. To her father and mother it seemed that this must be only a new phase of her insanity; but to the Roffs there remained no doubt that in her they beheld an actual reincarnation of the girl whom they had buried twelve years before,—that is to say, when Lurancy herself was a puny, wailing infant. Eagerly they seconded her entreaties to be allowed to return with them; and, Mrs. Vennum being completely prostrated by this unexpected development, it was soon decided that the little girl should for the time being take up her residence under the Roff roof.

Back to the Roff Home

SHE removed there February 11, and on the way an event occurred that vastly strengthened belief in the reality of her claims. The Vennums and the Roffs lived at opposite ends of Watseka; but the latter family, at the time of Mary's death in 1865, had been occupying a dwelling in a central section of the town. Arrived at this house, Lurancy unhesitatingly turned to enter it, and seemed much astonished when told that her home was elsewhere. "Why," said she in a positive tone, "I know that I live here."

It was indeed with some difficulty that she was persuaded to continue her journey; but once at its end all signs of disappointment vanished, and she passed gaily from room to room, identifying objects that she had never seen before, which had been well known to Mary Roff.

Her pseudo-parents were in ecstasies of joy. "Truly," they said to each other, "our daughter who was dead has been restored to us!" and anxiously they inquired of her how long they might hope to have her with them.

"The angels," was her response, "will let me stay till sometime in May—and oh how happy I am!" Happy and contented she proved herself; and, which was remarked by all who saw her, entirely free from the maladies that had so sorely beset both the living Lurancy and the dead Mary. For her life as Lurancy she appeared to have no remembrance; but she readily and unflinchingly recollected everything connected with the career of Mary. She was well aware also that she was masquerading, as it were, in a borrowed body.

"Do you remember," Dr. Stevens asked her one day, "the time you cut your arm?"

"Yes, indeed; and," slipping up her sleeve, "I can show you the scar. It was—" She paused, and quickly added, "Oh, this is not the arm; that one is in the ground," and proceeded to describe the spot where Mary had been buried and the circumstances attending her funeral. Old acquaintances of Mary's were greeted as though they had been seen only the day before; although in one or two cases there was lack of recognition, due, it was inferred, to physical changes in the visitors' appearance since Mary had known them on earth.

Tests, suggested and carried out by Dr. Stevens and Roff, only reinforced the view that they were really dealing with a visitant from the unseen world. For instance, when the little girl was playing outdoors one afternoon, Roff suggested to his wife that she bring down stairs a velvet hat that their daughter had worn the last year of her life, lay it on the hat stand, and see if Lurancy would recognize it. This was done, and the recognition was instant. With a smile of delight Lurancy picked up the hat, mentioned an incident connected with it, and asked, "Have you my box of letters also?"

The box was found, and rummaging through it the child presently cried, "Oh, ma, here is a collar I tatted! Ma, why did you not show me my letters and things before?" One by one she picked out and identified relics dating back to Mary's girlhood, long before Lurancy Vennum had come into the world.

She displayed too not a little of the clairvoyant ability ascribed to Mary. The story is told that on one occasion she affirmed that her supposed brother,