

# How I Know the Dead Return

A RECORD OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE.

... BY ...

W. T. STEAD,

*Editor of "The Review of Reviews."*

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REPRINTED FROM "THE HARBINGER OF LIGHT."

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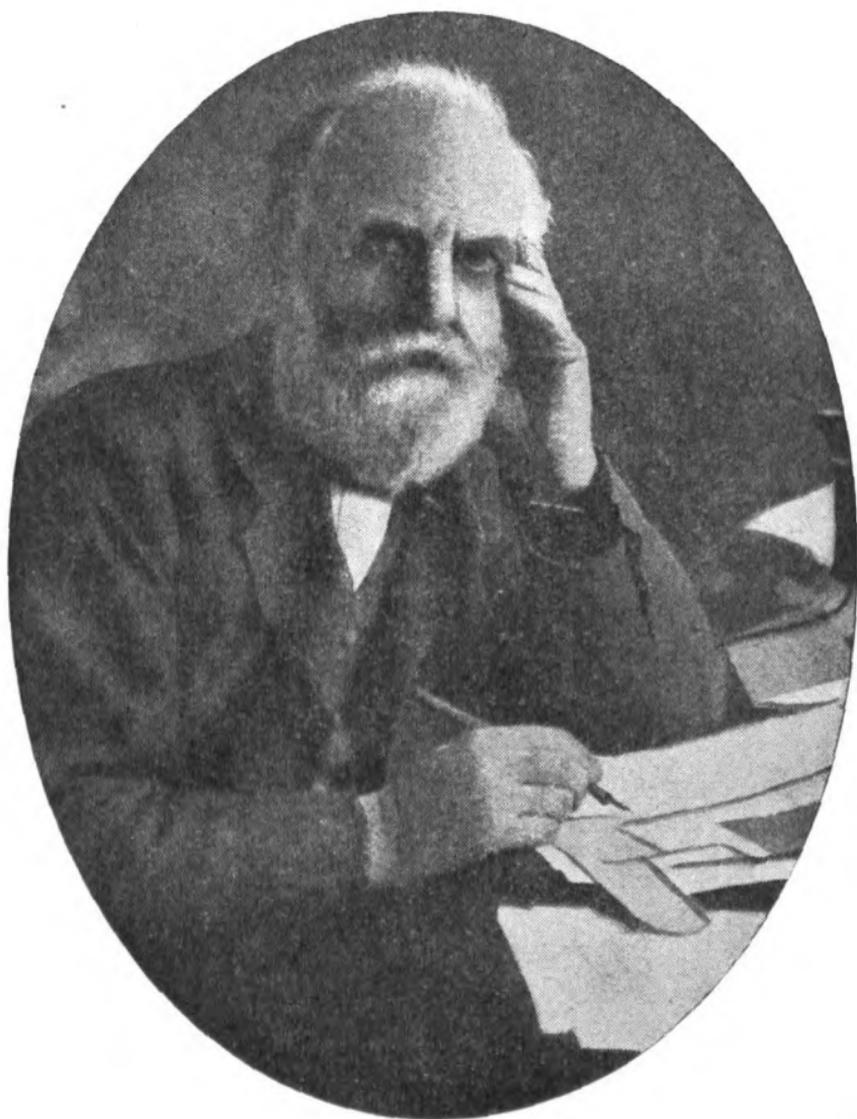
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# How I Know the Dead Return

A RECORD OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE.

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By W. T. STEAD.

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Cecil Rhodes once told me that early in life he had devoted much thought to the question whether or not there was a God. He came to the conclusion that there was a 50 per cent. chance that there was a God, and therefore that it was a matter of the first importance to ascertain what God wanted him to do. In like fashion I would ask the reader to consider whether or not there is any proof that the conscious life of his personality will persist after death. If he examines the evidence he will probably come to the conclusion that there is a certain per cent. chance that such is the case. He may put it at 50 per cent., at 90 per cent., or at 10 per cent., or even at a 1 per cent. off chance that death does not end all. In face of the fact that the immense majority of the greatest minds in all ages have firmly believed that the personality survives death, he will hardly venture to maintain that he is justified in asserting that there is not even a 1 per cent. chance that he will go on living after his body has returned to its ele-

ments. Of course, if he should be absolutely convinced that not even such an irreducible minimum of a chance exists that he may be mistaken, if he thinks that he knows he is right and that Plato and the Apostle Paul were wrong, I beg him to read no further. This article is not written for him. I am addressing myself solely to those who are willing to admit that there is at least an odd chance that all the religions and most of the philosophies—to say nothing of the universal instinct of the human race—may have had some foundation for the conviction that there is a life after death. Put the percentage of probability as low as you like, if there be even the smallest chance of its truth it is surely an obvious corollary from such an admission that there is no subject more worthy careful and scientific examination. Is it a fact or is it not? How can we arrive at certainty on the subject? It may be that this is impossible. But we ought not to despair of arriving at some definite solution of the question one way or the other, until we have exhausted all the facilities for investigation at our disposal. Nothing can be less scientific than to ignore the subject and to go on living from day to day in complete uncertainty whether we are entities which dissolve like the morning mist when our bodies die, or whether we are destined to go on living after the change we call death.

Assuming that I carry the reader so far with me, I proceed to ask what kind of evidence can be produced to justify the acceptance of a belief in the persistence of personality after death, not as a mere hypothesis, but as an ascertained and demonstrable fact.

## I.

The recent applications of electricity in wireless telegraphy and wireless telephony, while proving nothing in themselves as to the nature or permanence of personality,

are valuable as enabling us to illustrate the difficulties as well as the possibilities of proving the existence of life after death.

In order to form a definite idea of the problem which we are about to attack, let us imagine the grave as if it were the Atlantic Ocean, as it appeared to our forefathers before the days of Christopher Columbus. In order to make the parallel complete, it is necessary to suppose that the Atlantic could only be traversed by vessels from east to west, and that ocean currents or strong easterly gales rendered it impossible for any voyager from Europe to America to return to the Old World. We shall thus be able to form a simple but perfectly clear conception of the difficulties which I am now about to discuss.

If Christopher Columbus after discovering America had been unable to sail back across the Atlantic, Europe would after a time have concluded that he had perished in an ocean which had no further shore. If innumerable other voyagers had set out on the same westward journey and had never returned, this conviction would have deepened into an absolute certainty. Yet Christopher Columbus and those who followed him might have been living and thriving and founding a new nation on the American continent. It would have been impossible for them to convince those they had left behind of their continued existence. Europe would have regarded America as

That undiscovered bourne from whence  
No traveller returns.

And their friends and relatives would have mourned the brave

Who went but who return not.

Yet all the while Christopher Columbus and his gallant men would have been living under better conditions than those which prevailed in the land of their birth.

What would have happened in those circumstances? In all probability the faith even of the most ardent believers in the reality of Columbus's great vision would have grown dim. If it did not altogether die out, it would be due to the fact that from time to time, in the dreams of the night, their friends saw him alive and well in a strange new world. But everything would be shadowy and unreal as a dream.

Now let us transport ourselves from the time of Columbus to our own day. We must assume that the original physical impossibility of crossing the Atlantic from west to east still continues. But in the intervening centuries the men who had crossed from east to west have increased and multiplied, and have built up a great nation with an advanced civilisation on the American continent. Like us they discover telegraphy, like us they invent and use the telephone. After a time they discover and apply the principle of wireless telegraphy, and after that they perfect the wireless telephone.

The terrors of the unknown would not daunt for ever the intrepid spirits of European explorers. A ship or ships would be equipped to cross the Atlantic. When their crews and passengers landed on the further shore they would discover, to their infinite amazement, not only that a vast continent existed within five days' steam from Liverpool, but that those who were thought to have perished had founded a great commonwealth in the New World. What would immediately happen?

The newcomers, finding themselves unable to return, would at once endeavour to utilise all the resources of modern science to enable them to communicate their great discovery to the Old World. They would endeavour to perfect and extend the use of wireless telegraphy, so as to enable them to flash the good news to their friends on the

European shore. At first they would fail from the lack of any receiving station on this side. But after a while, by some happy chance, a wireless message from America might be caught on some sea coast Marconi station.

When that message arrived, how would it be received? In all probability it would be fragmentary, incoherent, and apparently purposeless. It would be set down to some practical joker or regarded as some random message sent out from somewhere in Europe. And so for a long time the attempt to communicate information would fail. After an interval a more coherent message would arrive. Efforts would be made to answer, but the replies might not arrive when anyone was in attendance at the other side; the instruments might not be properly attuned, the messages might be so mutilated as to be unintelligible. A few cranks who had never lost the faith, traditional and dim, that there was a world beyond the seething waste of waters, would go on experimenting, wasting time and money, and exposing themselves to the ridicule of the scientific world.

At last, after innumerable disappointments, it is possible that the captain of the last exploring expedition might succeed in getting through a message, clear, direct to the point, such as this:—

From Captain Smith, of the *Resolute* s.s., to Lloyds, London. Alive and well. Discovered new world filled with descendants of Christopher Columbus and his men.

What would follow the receipt of such a Marconigram? It would probably arrive so many years after the expedition had sailed that no one would at first remember who Captain Smith was. When the records were looked up, and the existence of the ship and its commander recalled, there would be some sensation, and a good deal of discussion. Efforts to reach the unknown land would be re-

newed, but the majority of practical, common-sense men of the world would regard the message as a practical joke, while men of science would prove to their own complete satisfaction the absolute impossibility of any such new world existing, and, a *fortiori*, of any such message being authentic.

But after a time more messages would come. Some method would be discovered of despatching replies and of receiving answers. At last the scientific world would wake up to the recognition of the fact that a *prima facie* case had been made out for the strange, the almost incredible, phenomena that seemed to point to the possibility that there was another world beyond the Atlantic, and that its inhabitants could by means of wireless telegraphy communicate with Europe. The difficulties they would encounter would be the identical difficulties which confront us in our quest for certainty as to life after death. But with patience and perseverance and careful allowance for the obstacles in the way of trans-oceanic intercourse, the existence of the American continent would in the end be established as firmly as I believe the existence of the Other World is very soon about to be established, beyond all question or cavil.

## II.

I will now leave the illustration and address myself directly to an explanation of the evidence which has convinced me of the reality of the persistence of personality after death.

I may make the prefatory remark that I have what is called the gift of automatic handwriting. By that I mean that I can, after making my mind passive, place my pen on paper, and my hand will write messages from friends at a distance; whether they are in the body or whether they have experienced the change called death makes no difference.

The advantage of obtaining such automatic messages from a friend who is still on this side the grave is that it is possible to verify their accuracy by referring to the person from whom the message comes. I may say, in order to avoid misapprehension, that in my case the transmitter of the message is seldom conscious of having transmitted it, and is sometimes surprised and annoyed to find that his unconscious mind had sent the message. As an illustration of this I will describe one such experience that occurred almost at the beginning of my experiments.

A lady friend of mine, who can write with my hand at any distance with even more freedom than she can write with her own, had been spending the week-end at Haslemere, a village about thirty miles from London. She had promised to luncn with me on Wednesday if she returned to town. Late on Monday afternoon I wished to know if she had left the country, and placing my pen on the paper I mentally asked if she had returned to London. My hand wrote as follows:—

“I am very sorry to tell you I have had a very painful experience, of which I am almost ashamed to speak. I left Haslemere at 2.27 p.m. in a second-class carriage, in which there were two ladies and one gentleman. When the train stopped at Godalming the ladies got out, and I was left alone with the man. After the train started he left his seat and came close to me. I was alarmed and repelled him. He refused to go away, and tried to kiss me. I was furious. We had a struggle. I seized his umbrella and struck him, but it broke, and I was beginning to fear that he would master me, when the train began to slow up before arriving at Guildford Station. He got frightened, let go of me, and before the train reached the platform he jumped out and ran away. I was very much upset. But I have the umbrella.”

I sent my secretary up with a note saying merely I was very sorry to hear what had happened, and added, "Be sure and bring the man's umbrella on Wednesday." She wrote in reply, "I am very sorry you know anything about it. I had made up my mind to tell nobody. I will bring the broken umbrella, but it was my umbrella, not his."

When she came to lunch on Wednesday she confirmed the story in every particular, and produced the broken umbrella, which was hers, not his. How that mistake occurred in the transmission of the message I do not know. Perhaps by the solitary inaccuracy to emphasise the correctness of the rest of the narrative. I may say that I had no idea as to the train she was travelling by, and had not the slightest suspicion that she had experienced so awkward an adventure.

I may say that since then, for a period of fifteen years, I have been, and am still, in the habit of receiving similar automatic messages from many of my friends. In some the percentage of error is larger, but as a rule the messages are astonishingly correct. This system of automatic telepathy from friends who are still in their bodies and who are in sympathy with me is for me as well established as the existence of electric telegraphy, or any other fact capable of verification every day.

The next question is whether this system of automatic telepathy between the living—which corresponds to wireless telegraphy on land—can be extended to those who have crossed the river of death—an extension which corresponds to the transmission of Marconigrams across the Atlantic.

Upon this point I will again relate my own experience. I had two friends, who were as devoted to each other as sisters. As is not unusual, they had promised each other that whichever died first would return to show herself to

the other in order to afford ocular demonstration of the reality of the world beyond the grave. One of them, whose Christian name was Julia, died in Boston shortly after the pledge was given. Within a few weeks she aroused her friend from her sleep in Chicago and showed herself by her bedside looking radiantly happy. After remaining silent for a few minutes she slowly dissolved into a light mist, which remained in the roof for half an hour. Some months after the friend in question came to England she and I were staying at Eastnor Castle, in the West of England, when Julia came back a second time. Her friend had not gone to sleep. She was wide awake, and again she saw Julia as distinct and as real as in life. Again she could not speak, and again the apparition faded away.

Her friend told me about the second visit, and asked me if I could get a message from Julia. I offered to try, and next morning, before breakfast, in my own room my hand wrote a very sensible message, brief, but to the point. I asked for evidence as to the identity of the transmitter. My hand wrote "Tell her to remember what I said when last we came to Minerva." I protested that the message was absurd. My hand persisted and said that her friend would understand it. I felt so chagrined at the absurdity of the message that for a long time I refused to deliver it. When at last I did so her friend exclaimed, "Did she actually write that? Then it is Julia herself, and no mistake." "How," I asked, bewildered, "could you come to Minerva?" "Oh," she replied, "of course, you don't know anything about that. Julia shortly before her death had bestowed the pet name of Minerva upon Miss Willard, the founder of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and had given her a brooch with a cameo of Minerva. She never afterwards called her anything but Minerva, and

the message which she wrote with your hand was substantially the same that she gave to me on the last time when Minerva and I came to bid her good-bye on her death-bed."

Here again there was a slight mistake. Minerva had come to her instead of Julia going to Minerva, but otherwise the message was correct.

I then proposed that I should try for more messages. My friend sat at one end of a long table, I sat at the other. After my hand had written answers to various questions, I asked Julia, as another test of her identity, if she could use my hand to call to her friend's memory some incident in their mutual lives of which I knew nothing. No sooner said than done.

My hand wrote: "Ask her if she can remember when we were going home together when she fell and hurt her spine." "That fills the bill," I remarked, as I read out the message, "for I never knew that you had met with such an accident." Looking across the table, I saw that my friend was utterly bewildered. "But, Julia," she objected, "I never hurt my spine in my life." "There," said I, addressing my hand reproachfully, "a nice mess you have made of it! I only asked you for one out of the thousand little incidents you both must have been through together, and you have gone and written what never happened."

Imperturbably my hand wrote, "I am quite right; she has forgotten." "Anybody can say that," I retorted; "can you bring it back to her memory?" "Yes," was the reply. "Go ahead," I answered; "when was it?" Answer: "Seven years ago." "Where was it?" "At Streator, in Illinois." "How did it happen?" "She and I were going home from the office one Saturday afternoon. There was snow on the ground. When we came opposite Mrs. Buell's house she slipped her foot on the kerbstone and fell and hurt her back." When I read these messages aloud her

friend exclaimed, "Oh, that's what you mean, Julia! I remember that quite well. I was in bed for two or three days with a bad back; but I never knew it was my spine that was hurt."

I need not multiply similar instances. The communication thus begun has been kept up for over fifteen years. I have no more doubt of the existence and the identity of Julia than I have of the existence of my wife or of my sister.

Here we had the appearance of the deceased in bodily form twice repeated on fulfilment of a promise made before death. This is followed up by the writing of messages, attested first by an allusion to a pet name that seemed to reduce the message to nonsense, and, secondly, by recalling to the memory of her friend with the utmost particularity of detail an incident which that friend had forgotten. No other medium was concerned in the receipt of these messages but myself. I had no motive to misrepresent or invent anything. As my narrative proves, I was sceptical rather than credulous. But things happened just as I have put them down. Can you be surprised if I felt I was really getting into communication with the Beyond?

### III.

It will be said by some of those who will not give me the lie as to the accuracy of the foregoing narrative, that it does not carry us beyond telepathy from the living. This may be admitted if telepathy from the unconscious mind is regarded as an actual fact. In this case the unconscious mind telepathed what the conscious mind of the transmitter had entirely forgotten. The hypothesis of telepathy from the unconscious mind of the living can be invoked to account for almost any message said to be transmitted by the dead. But there is one class of messages for which telepathy from incarnate minds, conscious or un-

conscious cannot account. That is the class of messages which relate neither to past nor present events, but which foretell an event or events which have still to happen.

Julia, on the very day on which she gave me the test messages recorded above, made a prediction, which was given me not really as a prediction but as a friendly warning intended to save another friend from making engagements which she would not be able to keep, as at a certain time she would be three thousand miles away in England. My friend laughed the warning to scorn. The prediction was twice repeated, and both times treated with contempt. Engagements were entered into which, when the time came, had to be cancelled, because my friend found it necessary to go to the distant place which Julia had named, and as Julia had predicted.

It will be objected that the prophecy in this case may have helped to bring about its own fulfilment. Let us admit that for the sake of argument. The same objection cannot be urged against the next item of evidence I am about to produce. Some years ago I had in my employment a lady of remarkable talent, but of a very uncertain temper and of anything but robust health. She became so difficult that one January I was seriously thinking of parting with her, when Julia wrote with my hand, "Be very patient with E. M.; she is coming over to our side before the end of the year." I was rather startled, for there was nothing to make me think that she was likely to die. I said nothing about the message, and continued her in my employ. It was, I think, about January 15th or 16th when the warning was given.

It was repeated in February, March, April, May, and June, each time the passage being written as a kind of reminder in the body of a longer communication about other

matters. "Remember, E. M. is going to pass over before the end of the year." In July E. M. inadvertently swallowed a tack. It lodged in her appendix, and she became dangerously ill. The two doctors by whom she was attended did not expect her to recover. When Julia was writing with my hand, I remarked, "I suppose this is what you foresaw when you predicted E. M. would pass over." To my infinite surprise she wrote, "No; she will get better of this, but all the same she will pass over before the year is out." E. M. did recover suddenly, to the amazement of the doctors, and was soon doing her usual work. In August, in September, in October, and in November the warning of her approaching death was each month communicated through my hand. In December E. M. fell ill with influenza. "So it was this," I remarked to Julia, "that you foresaw." Again I was destined to be surprised, for Julia wrote, "No; she will not come over here naturally. But she will come before the year is out." I was alarmed, but I was told I could not prevent it. Christmas came. E. M. was very ill. But the old year passed, and she was still alive. "You see you were wrong," I said to Julia, "E. M. is still alive." Julia replied, "I may be a few days out, but what I said is true."

About January 10th Julia wrote to me, "You are going to see E. M. to-morrow. Bid her farewell. Make all necessary arrangements. You will never see her again on earth." I went to see her. She was feverish, coughed badly, and was expecting to be removed to a nursing hospital, where she could receive better attention. All the time I was with her she talked of what she was going to do to carry out her work. When I bade her good-bye I wondered if Julia was not mistaken.

Two days after I received a telegram informing me that E. M. had thrown herself out of a four-storey window in delirium, and had been picked up dead. It was within a day or two of the end of the twelve months since the first warning was given.

This narrative can be proved by the manuscript of the original messages, and by the signed statement of my two secretaries, to whom, under the seal of secrecy, I communicated the warnings of Julia. No better substantiated case of prevision written down at the time, and that not once but twelve times, is on record. However you may account for it, telepathy, conscious or unconscious, breaks down here.

#### IV.

The lady whose initials were E. M., and whose tragic fate I have just described, had promised me that if she died before me she would do four things. She had constantly written automatically with my hand during her life. She promised, in the first place, that she would use my hand, if she could, after death, to tell me how it fared with her on the other side. In the second place, she promised that, if she could, she would appear to one or more of her friends to whom she could show herself. In the third place, she would come to be photographed, and, fourthly, she would send me a message through a medium, authenticating the message by countersigning it with the simple mathematical figure of a cross within a circle.

E. M. did all four. (1) She has repeatedly written with my hand, apparently finding it just as easy to use my hand now as she did when still in the body.

(2) She has repeatedly appeared to two friends of mine, one a woman, the other a man. She appeared once in a dining-room full of people. She passed unseen by any but her friend, who declares that she saw her distinctly. On another occasion she appeared in the street in broad daylight, walked for a little distance, and then vanished. I may say that her appearance was so original it would be difficult to mistake her for anybody else.

(3) She has been photographed at least half a dozen times after her death. All her portraits are plainly recognisable, but none of them are copies of any photographs taken in earth life.

(4) There remains the test of a message accompanied by the sign of a cross within a circle. I did not get this for several months. I had almost given up all hopes, when one day a medium who was lunching with a friend of mine received it on the first attempt she made at automatic writing. "Tell William not to blame me for what I did. I could not help myself," was the message. Then came a plainly but roughly drawn circle, and inside it the cross. No one knew of our agreement as to the test but myself. I did not know the medium, I was not present, nor was my friend expecting any message from E.M.

Is it surprising, then, that after such experiences I have no more doubt of the possibility of communicating with the so-called dead than I have of being able to send this article to the Editor of the *Harbinger of Light*?

## V.

I have referred to spirit photography. Let me disarm any sceptical reader by admitting that nothing is more easy than to fake bogus spirit photographs, and further that an expert conjurer can almost always cheat the most vigilant observer. The use of marked plates, which I handle, expose, and develop myself, no doubt afford some protection against fraud. But my belief in the authenticity of spirit photographs rests upon a far firmer foundation than that of the fallible vigilance of the experimenter. The supreme test of an authentic spirit photograph is that a plainly recognisable portrait of a dead person shall be obtained by a photographer who knows nothing whatever of the existence of such a person, and that no visible form shall be seen by the sitter in front of the camera.

I have had such photographs not once but many times. I will here only mention one. The photographer whose mediumship enables him to photograph the Invisibles is a very old and rather illiterate man, to whom this faculty was at one time a serious hindrance to his photographic business. He is clairvoyant and clairaudient. During the late Boer war I went with a friend to have a sitting with him, wondering who would come.

I had hardly taken my seat before the old man said: "I had a great fright the other day. An old Boer came into the studio carrying a gun. He fairly frightened me, he looked so fierce, so I said to him, 'Go away; I don't like guns.' And he went away. Now he's back again. He came in with you. He has not got his gun now, and he does not look so fierce. Shall we let him stay?"

"By all means," I replied. "Do you think you could get his photograph?"

"I don't know," said the old man; "I can try."

So I sat down in front of the camera, and an exposure was duly made. Neither my friend nor I could see any other person in the room but the photographer and ourselves. Before the plate was removed I asked the photographer:

"You spoke to the old Boer the other day. Could you speak to him again?"

"Yes," he said; "he's still there behind you."

"Would he answer any question if you asked him?"

"I don't know," said the old man; "I can try."

"Ask him what his name is!"

The photographer appeared to put a mental question, and to listen for a reply. Then he said:

"He says his name is Piet Botha."

"Piet Botha," I objected. "I know Philip, Louis, Chris, and I do not know how many other Bothas. But Piet I never heard of."

"That's what he says his name is," doggedly replied the old man.

When he developed the plate there was seen standing behind me a hirsute, tall, stalwart man, who might have been a Boer or a Moujik. I said nothing, but waited till the war came to an end, and General Botha came to London. I sent the photograph to him by Mr. Fischer, who was Prime Minister of the old Orange Free State. Next day Mr. Wessels, another Free State delegate, came to see me.

"Where did you get that photograph," he asked, "the photograph you gave to Mr. Fischer?"

I told him exactly how it had come.

He shook his head. "I don't hold with superstition. Tell me, how did you get that portrait? That man did not know William Stead—that man was never in England."

"Well," I replied, "I have told you how I got it, and you need not believe me if you don't like. But why are you so excited about it?"

"Why," said he, "because that man was a near relative of mine. I have got his portrait hanging up in my house at home."

"Really," I said. "Is he dead?"

"He was the first Boer Commandant killed in the siege of Kimberley."

"And what was his name?"

"Pietrus Johannes Botha," he replied, "but we always called him Piet Botha for short."

I still have the portrait in my possession. It has been subsequently identified by two other Free Staters who knew Piet Botha well.

This, at least, is not a case which telepathy can explain. Nor will the hypothesis of fraud hold water. It was the merest accident that I asked the photographer to see if the spirit would give his name. No one in England, so far as I have been able to ascertain, knew that any Piet Botha ever existed.

## VI.

What is wanted is that those who profess to disbelieve in the existence of life after death should honestly attempt to define the kind of evidence which they would consider convincing. I have narrated in this paper what

seems to me conclusive evidence of the continuance of personality after death. All of these incidents occurred in my own personal experience. Their credibility to my readers depends upon their estimate of my veracity. These things actually occurred as I have written them down. Supposing that they had happened to you, my reader, could you refuse to admit that there is at least a *prima facie* case for a careful exhaustive scientific examination into the subject? What more evidence, what kind of evidence, under what conditions, is wanted, before conviction is established?

I ask no one hastily to accept anything on other people's testimony. It is true that all people are not mediums, any more than all telephones can take Marconi messages. I am fortunate in being my own medium, which eliminates one possible hypothesis. But there are plenty of honest mediums, some possibly in your own family if you cared to seek for them.

One last word. For the last fifteen years I have been convinced by the pressure of a continually accumulating mass of first-hand evidence of the truth of the persistence of personality after death, and the possibility of intercourse with the departed. But I always said, "I will wait until someone in my own family has passed beyond the grave before I finally declare my conviction on this subject.

Twelve months ago this month of December I saw my eldest son, whom I had trained in the fond hope that he would be my successor, die at the early age of thirty-three. The tie between us was of the closest. No one could deceive me by fabricated spurious messages from my beloved son.

Twelve months have now passed, in almost every week of which I have been cheered and comforted by messages from my boy, who is nearer and dearer to me than ever before. The preceding twelve months I had been much abroad. I heard less frequently from him in that year than I have heard from him since he passed out of our sight. I have not taken his communications by my own hand. I knew him so well that what I wrote might have been the unconscious echoes of converse in the past. He has communicated with me through the hands of two slight acquaintances, and they have been one and all as clearly stamped with the impress of his own character and mode of thought as any of the letters he wrote to me during his sojourn on earth.

After this I can doubt no more. For me the problem is solved, the truth is established, and I am glad to have this opportunity of testifying publicly to all the world that, so far as I am concerned, doubt on this subject is henceforth impossible.



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