

Uncle Jerry's Watch

The Survival Files — Case 10 — ESS = 251

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An early member of the Society for Psychical Research, and a founder of its American equivalent (the ASPR), was Professor William James of Harvard University. Generally considered one of the greatest psychologists of all time, Dr. James also taught physiology and philosophy and is known as the father of American pragmatism. In the autumn of 1885, James' mother-in-law and sister-in-law attended what may have been the first sitting that Mrs. Leonora Piper ever gave to someone outside of her circle of family and friends. Rumors had been circulating around Boston ever since Piper had discovered her mediumistic talents a few years before, but she had been uncomfortable with the notoriety and had spurned outside sitters. Why his in-laws were granted an exception we do not know, but we do know that they were extremely impressed. Dr. James tried to persuade his in-laws that most marvels had earthly explanations, but he finally gave in to their insistence that he go and see for himself.

A few days later, James and his wife attended a sitting with Piper. So impressed was James that he personally took control of séance arrangements for the ensuing year and a half. Thus began the greatest — longest, best researched, most evidential — chapter in the history of Survival research. First Dr. James, then Professor Richard Hodgson, then Professor James Hyslop investigated and tested Piper over a period of almost 30 years. They brought hundreds of sitters to her under false names. They hired detectives to follow her. They even monitored her mail. They took her to England where she knew no one, kept her in the homes of SPR members, and watched her as closely as any zealous skeptic could wish. In fact, Hodgson, Professor of Legal Studies at Cambridge University, was known world-wide for his skepticism; he came to America with the announced intention of proving Piper a fraud, as he had done for other supposed mediums. And what, after nearly 16 years of research, did Hodgson conclude? In his own words: "I cannot profess to have any doubt but that the 'chief communicators' to whom I have referred in the foregoing pages, are veritably the personalities that they claim to be; that they have survived the change we call death, and that they have directly communicated with us whom we call living through Mrs. Piper's entranced organism."

To eliminate the possibility of a medium gaining evidential material via telepathy, researchers have often tried asking for facts that are not known to anyone present at the reading. A good example of this, and of Piper's work in general, is the case of Uncle Jerry's Watch.

When Piper was first brought to England she stayed with various members of the SPR. One of her hosts (and investigators) was Sir Oliver Lodge, a professor of physics and mathematics in England and a Fellow of the Royal Society. (Like many others, Lodge was quite skeptical of an afterlife until he had studied Piper. Unlike some others, when faced with the overwhelming evidence Piper and others provided, Lodge possessed the strength of character to admit that he had been wrong and to publicly endorse the idea of personal immortality.)

According to Lodge, he devised an experiment, in late 1889, to see if Piper could obtain "facts which were not only out of my knowledge but which never could have been in it."

Lodge had several uncles, at least two of whom were still living, although very elderly at the time of this test. One of these uncles, whose name was Robert, had been very close to his twin brother, Jerry, who had died some 20 years earlier. Oliver wrote to Robert asking for some object that had belonged to his twin, and Robert responded by sending a gold watch that Jerry

had been fond of. Lodge told no one of the watch and, within a few hours of its receipt, he handed it to the entranced Piper.

“I was told almost immediately,” Lodge reports, “that it had belonged to one of my uncles ...one that had been very fond of Uncle Robert ... [and] that the watch was now in possession of this same Uncle Robert, with whom its late owner was anxious to communicate. After some difficulty and many wrong attempts, *Phinuit* [Piper’s control; the name is pronounced fin-WEE] caught the name, Jerry, short for Jeremiah.” Then Lodge heard “This is my watch, and Robert is my brother, and I am here. Uncle Jerry. My watch.”

Lodge then asked if Jerry could recall trivial details of his boyhood life with Robert. Uncle Jerry “recalled episodes such as swimming the creek when they were boys together, and running some risk of getting drowned; killing a cat in Smith's field; the possession of a small rifle, and of a long peculiar skin, like a snake-skin, which he thought was now in the possession of Uncle Robert.” Lodge states that, “these details of boyhood, two-thirds of a century ago, were utterly and entirely out of my ken. My father himself had only known these brothers as men.”

And how many of these details could Uncle Robert confirm? According to Lodge: “He recollected something about swimming the creek, though he himself had merely looked on. He had a distinct recollection of having had the snake skin, and of the box in which it was kept, though he did not know where it was then. But he altogether denied killing the cat, and could not recall Smith's field.”

Skeptics might well point out that swimming in a creek and playing with a snake skin were hardly unusual activities for boys of that place and age. But in this case, it’s the miss that makes the case. For Robert had another brother, name of Frank, an old sea captain living in Cornwall. And Robert, who realized that his memory was failing him, wrote to Frank. And Frank wrote back to say that, indeed, Smith's field was a place where they used to play near their home, in Barking, Essex; and that another of their brothers did kill a cat there. Moreover, Frank clearly recalled a “foolhardy episode” involving Jerry and him swimming in the creek, near a mill-race.

More details and an analysis of this case may be found on pages 70-81 of *The Survival Files*.

For Further Information See: "A Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance" by F.W.H. Myers, O. Lodge, W. Leaf, and W. James in *The Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 1889-90, Vol. 6, pp. 436-659.

END CASE 10