



## Photos of Ghosts The Burden of Believing the Unbelievable

Today when we see alleged ghost photographs or films we can easily shrug them away, knowing that with Photoshop or video-editing software it is a simple matter to create all kinds of fake marvels. However, more than a century ago when photography was still in its infancy, there was no knowledge of trick photography. Seeing photos of ghostly faces and figures floating around in the air must have been quite a shock to our ancestors.

### The Origins of Spirit Photography

The practice of spirit photography was officially born in 1862 when William H. Mumler, a Boston photographer, discovered that in a picture he had taken of himself there also appeared the image of his dead cousin. Photographic techniques were still at a rudimentary stage: the first working photographic process, the daguerreotype, had been developed only twenty-two years earlier by Louis-Jacque-Mandé Daguerre. Therefore photography was a relatively young art when Mumler announced that he had been able to capture a ghost on film. The public rushed enthusiastically to his studio to get pictures of dead relatives.

The fundamental technique used by every spirit photographer simply involved taking a picture of the client. It was only in the developing process that one or more extras in the form of ghostly faces were added to the photograph. Usually, the clients would recognize in these images a dead relative or friend.

When it was discovered that some of Mumler's most famous pictures contained extras resembling people still quite alive, even believers became sus-

picious. One of Mumler's most touching photos, displayed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle during his lectures, was later shown to be a fake. It showed a crowd of mourners at the London Cenotaph on Armistice Day; above the crowd was a fog of spirit faces—those of fallen heroes, it was supposed. However, it turned out that some of the spirits were faces of living football players, and one belonged to the living African boxer Battling Siki.

Mumler's trick was to use double exposures, a technique almost unheard of in those days, by which he had been able to superimpose faces from other pictures onto the pictures belonging to his clients. He was accused of fraud and taken to court; at the trial, however, he was acquitted. Mumler later died in poverty in 1884.

### The Case of the Crewe Circle

At the turn of the century, one of the most famous spirit photographers was William Hope (1863–1933), a member of the Crewe Circle—a group of spiritualists from Crewe, England, whose members appeared to be able to register the faces of spirits on photographic plates simply by holding the plates in their hands. It was further claimed that the plates could be furnished by Hope's clients themselves. Even Conan Doyle obtained a picture made in this fashion resembling his dead sister.

However, in February 1922, psychic researcher Harry Price (1881–1948) of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), along with a magician named Seymour, conducted an investigation into the methods of the Crewe Circle. Along with fellow SPR researcher Eric

J. Dingwall and magician William S. Marriott, they devised a plan that consisted of presenting Hope with a set of glass negatives that had been secretly marked with X-rays. The trap worked: when Hope returned the plates, the one containing the “extra” spirit image showed no sign of the markings; this meant that Hope had switched a prepared plate for the secretly marked one. “In the above case,” began the Price accusation that appeared in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, “it can, we think, hardly be denied that Mr William Hope has been found guilty of deliberately substituting his own plates for those of a sitter.... It implies that the medium brings to the sitting a duplicate slide and faked plates for fraudulent purposes.”

Spiritualists denounced the report as part of a conspiracy against Hope, and Conan Doyle, who was then vice president of the Society for the Study of Supernormal Pictures, took up the defenses of the Crewe Circle. He begged Price to reconsider his position, hoping to settle the controversy “in some honorable fashion.” Conan Doyle wrote, “It makes an open sore in the movement.” Price, however, refused to recant his report, so Conan Doyle started working on a pamphlet on spirit photography detailing his side of the affair. He talked about the case to Houdini in a letter he wrote on April 13, 1922:

I have written a book on Psychic Photography with special reference to the Crewe Circle. The evidence in their favor is overwhelming, though what happened on a special occasion with 2 amateur conjurers, out for a stunt, and a third (Dingwall) behind them is more than I can say. We find

that another test was independently [*sic*] carried out about the same time, when the Kodak Co. marked a plate. The mark was found by them all right afterwards, and also an extra. Our opponents talk of one failure and omit the great series of successes. However, truth wins and there's lots of time.

Houdini was not impressed. He had tried to get an audience with Hope in December 1921 but was informed that the medium's engagements would keep him busy for months. Houdini then asked fellow British magician DeVega (Alexander Stewart, 1891–1971) if he would sit for a photograph with Hope. During the sitting, DeVega was sure that the slide he had loaded had been changed for another one and told Houdini. His skepticism toward Hope, then, seemed to be justified. Conan Doyle, however, was still convinced that Hope's spirit photos were genuine, as he reported to Houdini in his letter dated August 6:

We seem to have knocked the bottom out of the Hope "exposure." The plates were marked by X-rays and we find by experiment that X-ray marks disappear on a 20-second exposure, which was the exact time given. Our time is continually wasted over nonsense of this sort, but I suppose it has to be done.

#### Belief Never Dies

Conan Doyle's letter worried Houdini because he had already started to talk publicly about the "unmasking" of the Crewe Circle. The magician then contacted Harry Price, who at the time was experimenting to see whether X-ray markings really disappear on exposure. At first the results seemed to confirm Conan Doyle's theory; however, further experimentation proved that X-rays do not disappear with prolonged exposure, thus proving that the plates had been switched. Meanwhile, Conan Doyle continued working on his pamphlet *The Case for Spirit Photography*, which he eventually privately published in the early twenties.

However, having lost one possible explanation for the disappearing marking, the spiritualists had to account for it in another way. One possible solution

was that the investigators did not actually give Hope the marked plate in an attempt to frame him, and this is what Conan Doyle suggests to Houdini in his letter of October 29:

The Hope case is more intricate than any Holmes case I ever invented. I am sure now that there was trickery on the part of the investigators and that the marked plates were not in the packet when taken to the dark room. One of them was returned by post anonymously *undeveloped* to the S.P.R. Now, since Hope and the College people knew nothing of the test, until four months later, how could they return an undeveloped plate, for how could they pick it out as a marked one, since the marking only shows on development? Clearly it was done by one of the Conspirators, and he could not have picked it out of all the other plates in the dark room, even if he had access to it. It is clear to me therefore that it never went to the dark room at all, but was taken out before. My pamphlet is ready but I hold it back in the hope of learning who the rascal was.

After receiving this letter, but without revealing his source, Houdini wrote



William H. Mumler from Wikimedia Commons

Famous photo of Mary Todd Lincoln with the "spirit" of her husband, President Abraham Lincoln.

**"Mr. Marriott has clearly proved one point, which is that a trained conjurer can, under the close inspection of three pairs of critical eyes, put a false image upon a plate. We must unreservedly admit it."**

**—Arthur Conan Doyle**

to Harry Price on November 18 asking whether these allegations were true: "There is a rumor afloat here that the Crewe circle were 'framed.' There is talk about an undeveloped negative being sent back anonymously. Have they any reason at all to claim that they were 'framed?'"

Actually, the return of the undeveloped plate could also be explained by Price's hypothesis of fraud: if Hope had

switched the marked plate for a previously exposed one, he would still possess the plate that Price had originally brought. The controversy between Conan Doyle and Price would resurface again during the following months, and Houdini would find himself right in the middle of the two opposing parties.

Price, for example, reprinted the results of his experiments with the Crewe Circle in the booklet *Cold Light on*

*Spiritualistic Phenomena* because, he explained in the booklet's preface, "the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research is printed only for circulation among its Members and Associates." The booklet caused quite a stir among spiritualists, and Conan Doyle entreated Price for years to take it out of circulation: "I do feel strongly that the popular sixpenny pamphlet designed to ruin a man who had 17 years of fine psychic work behind him is wrong . . . my belief is that you yourself did not write it. However so long as your name is on [it] we can only go for you." In his autobiography, *Confessions of a Ghost Hunter*, Price recalled, "Arthur Conan Doyle and his friends . . . abused me for years for exposing Hope."

As for the magician Marriott (see also my column "William S. Marriott's Gambols with the Ghosts," *SI*, March/April 2003), he was able to score a point with Conan Doyle. In 1921 a journalist named James Douglas had a photo of

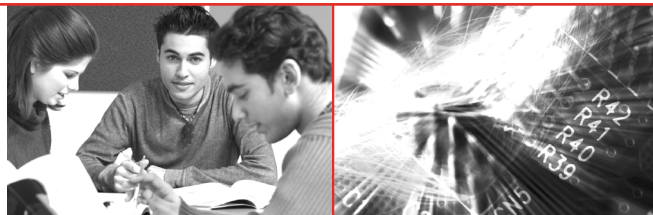
himself taken by William Hope that, when developed, showed the presence of a spirit extra. Douglas was so impressed by the phenomenon that he issued a public challenge to anyone who could duplicate the feat without using psychic powers. Marriott accepted the challenge and performed not only in front of Douglas but Conan Doyle as well. He produced a picture of Douglas and Conan Doyle with a young woman and a picture of Conan Doyle with little fairies dancing in front of him. He then explained in detail how he had manipulated the photos, and Conan Doyle felt compelled to write a public statement: "Mr. Marriott has clearly proved one point, which is that a trained conjurer can, under the close inspection of three pairs of critical eyes, put a false image upon a plate. We must unreservedly admit it."

This episode, however, did not convince the believers even though the saga came to an end in 1932 when Fred Barlow, a former friend and supporter of

Hope's work and former secretary of the Society for the Study of Supernormal Pictures, gave a joint lecture along with Major W. Rampling-Rose to the SPR to present findings gleaned from an extensive series of tests on the methods Hope used to produce his spirit photos. The two, who presented their case in depth in Volume 41 of the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, concluded that the "spirit extras" that appeared in Hope's photographs were produced fraudulently. It was only Hope's death at Salford hospital during the publication of the report that ultimately ended the debate. The believers would soon start to find extras of his face in the spirit photographs of others.

The case of William Hope and his Crewe Circle deserves to be remembered today because it shows that it is practically impossible (and futile) to try to convince someone who wants to believe even in the face of quite convincing contrary evidence. ■

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