

MIND READING IN PUBLIC

David P. Abbott

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Not long ago I received a letter from an old-time friend, in which he urgently requested me to make a journey to his city. In bygone days he and I had spent many hours together, discussing the mysteries of existence, the hidden powers which nature manifests to us, and the origin and destiny of the human soul. My friend is a physician, and what is more, an earnest student; and he is also an investigator of that strange phenomenon in nature which manifests itself in organized beings subjectively, as thought, feeling and things spiritual.

Many times had we discussed the possibility and also the probability of an existence of the spiritual part of man after death. Many times had he reported to me cases of strange phenomena that tended to prove the indestructibility of spirit.

When I received this missive, it stated to me that the writer most earnestly desired my presence in his city, that I might assist in investigating a very strange and marvelous case of psychic phenomena. The case was that of a certain traveling spirit medium, who claimed the power to summon from the realms of the invisible the shades of our departed friends and loved ones. He gave most marvelous exhibitions to prove his strange and miraculous power. My friend stated that he thought he had at last found a person with at least some queer psychical gift, if not even possessing the power that he claimed. He had watched the exhibition most carefully, and had even served on a committee on the psychic's stage; and he could find no evidence of trickery of any kind. He was inclined to believe that this strange being really possessed the power of vision without the use of human eyes as he certainly read sealed missives, of which he could in no secret manner have obtained knowledge.

Accordingly, on Saturday evening, I journeyed to a city one hundred miles away to witness the work of this modern sorcerer. On my arrival I suggested to my friend a number of ways by which such things could be performed by trickery, but he informed me that none of my explanations seemed to elucidate this strange work. The secret did not consist in the use of odorless alcohol, for the reason that the medium never touched the sealed envelopes at all. In fact he was never nearer to them than ten feet. This also made it impossible for him to use the principle on which the trick is based, which is known to the profession as "Washington Irving Bishop's Sealed Letter Reading."

He informed me that sheets of paper or cards were passed to the spectators in the audience, and at the same time envelopes in which to seal their questions were furnished for them; that the spectators wrote questions as directed, many times signing their own names to them. He was certain that many persons folded their written questions before sealing them, and that the operator himself did not even collect the envelopes on many occasions. He informed me that the best evidence of the genuineness of the performance lay in the fact that the medium seemed to have no fixed conditions for his experiments; but seemed to perform them in a different manner on each occasion. The conditions were different in every case, yet he always read the questions with the most marvelous certainty.

I thought the matter over after this, but could in no way think of any plausible means of accomplishing his work by trickery. I finally decided to wait and see the performance first, and to figure afterwards on the method employed.

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Accordingly, at eight o'clock that evening I was seated in the hall with my friend, and shortly afterwards the "Seer" made his appearance, taking his seat on the stage. He was a very slender personage, with long hair and a particularly ghostly look. He took his seat quietly on the stage. In a short time his manager appeared and made an opening address, which I will not repeat, and then asked some boy in the audience to pass cards around to the spectators on which they were to write questions. Envelopes were also distributed, in which to seal the cards. When the writing was finished, the manager asked any boy to take a hat which he held in his hand, and collect the sealed envelopes. After the boy, whom everyone knew to be a local resident, kindly volunteered for this service and executed it, a committee was invited to the stage to properly blindfold the medium. This was done in a satisfactory manner, and the committee then returned to the audience. The manager now led the blindfolded medium to the rear of the stage, where he was seated somewhat behind a table, on which were some flowers, a music box, etc. However, the medium was in view plainly; and he never removed the bandage from his eyes or in any manner molested it.

When the boy came on the stage directly from the front with the hat full of sealed envelopes, the manager placed a handkerchief over the hat and asked the boy to take a seat near the front of the stage facing the audience. He was also directed to hold the hat in his lap, and to deliver the envelopes to the manager, one at a time, as he should call for them.

The operator now delivered a lecture, lasting some ten or fifteen minutes, explaining the strange powers of the blindfolded medium, who sat at the rear of the stage in full view; while the boy still maintained the seat at the front of the stage, and held the hat of envelopes in sight of all.

After the lecture, the manager requested the boy to give him one of the envelopes, which the boy did. The manager did not look toward it in any manner; but took it in the tips of his right fingers, held it in the air, and asked the medium to give the writer of this question a test. The medium shivered a few times, allowed his frame to convulse slightly, and thus began:

"I feel the influence of one who was a brother. I get the name of Clarence. Will the one who wrote this question identify it as his?" There was no response from the spectators, and the medium asked again that the writer speak out. Still silence greeted his request; when suddenly he pointed his bony finger into the crowd, while his blinded face confronted them, and exclaimed: "Mr. John H——, why do you not respond to your test?" A gentleman in the audience then acknowledged the test as his. The medium then continued: "Clarence was drowned. I sense the cold chilly water as it envelopes his form." At this the lady sitting with the gentleman began to cry. The medium continued: "The drowning was wholly an accident. There was no foul play. Now, Mr. H——, have I answered your question, and are you satisfied with your test?" The gentleman, a well-known citizen, acknowledged that he was perfectly satisfied.

The manager then laid the envelope on a small table and asked the boy for another one. The boy gave him another from the hat when the blindfolded medium, ten feet or more distant, gave the second test.

He shivered again and began: "I feel the influence of a young lady who died suddenly. She says, 'Sister Mary, I am very happy, and death was not so hard to endure. I want you to consult a good honorable attorney, and take his advice in the lawsuit you ask me about.'" The medium then continued, "Miss L——, your sister regards you with a look of great tenderness and love. Are you satisfied with your test?" A lady then replied that she certainly was entirely convinced.

The manager now laid this sealed envelope beside the other one and again called for another. This was continued until all of the envelopes in the hat were removed and the questions answered. None of the envelopes were opened. In some instances the medium first read the questions, word for word, before answering them; and when he did so, he described the writing minutely, even the formation of the strokes of the letters.

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After all of these tests were given, the medium removed the blindfold and seemed much exhausted. Then the tables were removed to one side of the stage, and a cabinet erected; after which some cabinet manifestations that were very interesting were given. When these were over, the manager collected the sealed envelopes from the table, and placed them on the front of the stage, inviting the writers to call, should they so desire, and get their questions. Some availed themselves of this opportunity and tore open a number of the envelopes until they found their own questions. The audience seemed greatly impressed with this exhibition, and the next day it was the talk of the town.

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On the next evening I again repaired to the public hall to witness and, if possible, fathom this performance. This time, however, I found that an entirely different method was employed. Envelopes and slips of paper were distributed; and after the questions were written and sealed the manager went about the room, gathering them up in a small black bag with a drawstring around its top. As he gathered up each one, and while the writer still held it, he gave to that person a number which was to serve as that particular person's number during the tests. At the same time the manager marked the number on the subject's envelope, while the subject held it, drawing a circle around the figure, after which the subject dropped the envelope into the sack.

When all were collected, the operator took the sack in the tips of his fingers, and holding it aloft, walked up the runway to the stage where a cord hung from a screw-eye fastened in the ceiling above. The other end of the cord was attached to a piece of furniture on the stage. The manager now attached the black bag containing the envelopes to the end of this string, and then taking the other end, drew the bag up to the ceiling near the screw-eye, where it remained in full view during the tests.

While the manager was doing all this, the ghost-like medium had been walking about the stage, reading in a large Bible. He now laid the Bible on a table and advanced to the front of the stage, while the manager delivered a lecture on spiritual philosophy and also on the strange power of the medium. After this the manager announced that the medium would hold a Bible service, during which time he would give the tests.

The medium now took his Bible, and seating himself in a chair facing the audience, began by reading a verse. After this he closed his eyes for a time, and then gave the first test. He began: "I will give these tests in the order in which the manager gave you your numbers, commencing with number one. Now, Mrs. Clara S——, I see standing near you an elderly lady, somewhat stooped; but I cannot see her face plainly. She seems to be your mother. She says to tell you that your son is doing well where he is, and for you not to worry, for he will return to you in time. Are you satisfied?" A lady in the audience was visibly affected, and acknowledged that the medium had answered her question correctly. The medium read another verse in the Bible, after which he gave the second test in a manner similar to the way in which he had given the first one. After this he read another verse, and so continued until all the questions in the sack were answered. The manager now lowered the sack, and emptying the envelopes into a small basket distributed them unopened to their writers.

The effect of this exhibition was fully as great as was that of the former one, and the medium continued to be the wonder of the town.

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On the next evening I again attended the meeting. On this occasion questions were written and sealed as on the former occasions. This time the medium was dressed as a "Mahatma," wearing a large turban. As soon as the questions were written, the manager collected them in a small wicker basket, and emptied them on a table on the stage. He only talked for a moment, describing what the medium would do. During all this time the medium was seated near the front of the stage. The medium now tapped a little bell he held in his hand, as if summoning the spirits, and began giving the tests in the most marvelous manner. He seemed somewhat nervous, and finally arose

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and walked across the stage, stopped a moment and then continued his walk. Meanwhile he kept giving the tests. Occasionally he would walk about nervously, and sometimes he would seat himself in the chair for a time; but he kept right on giving test after test, with perfect accuracy, while the sealed envelopes remained in full view on the table. During this time, and in fact during the time the audience was writing the questions, neither the medium nor the manager had ever left the sight of the spectators for even an instant.

After all the tests were given, the medium, very much exhausted, fell on a couch on the stage; while the manager scooped the envelopes back into the basket, and then distributed them to their writers in an unopened condition.

I will now explain how this "occultist" gave these various billet tests.

We will first refer to the tests given the first evening. A boy from the audience gathered up the sealed envelopes in a hat, and brought them to the stage, sitting with them in his lap; while he delivered one at a time to the manager, who held it aloft, during which time the blindfolded medium in the rear gave the test.

There was a simple little move that escaped the eyes of the spectators in this instance. The spectators did not know what was to happen, neither did the boy. The move was executed as follows: Just as the boy came on the stage with the hat the manager received the hat in his right hand and in a natural manner. Nothing was thought of this, as there was nothing suspicious in the act. Meanwhile the manager directed the boy to take a chair that sat to the left of the front of the stage, and to place it to the right side in front, facing the audience, and to take his seat thereon. Now, this conversation with the boy naturally occupied the attention of the spectators; and while the boy was executing the directions the manager turned to the table, which was somewhat back on the stage, and apparently took a large handkerchief from it, and with the hat still apparently in his hand, he stepped to the boy, giving him the hat of envelopes and the handkerchief, at the same time instructing him how to cover the hat, and how to deliver the envelopes one at a time. All of this maneuvering seemed so natural that the audience thought nothing whatever of it.

Now, as the manager turned to the table to get the handkerchief, and while most eyes were on the boy as he placed his chair and took his seat, the manager deftly exchanged the hat in his right hand for another hat just like it, that was filled with "dummy" envelopes and which was behind the flowers, music box, etc., on the table. As he immediately turned with the hat apparently still in his hand, but with a large handkerchief in his other hand, everything seemed natural and the audience thought nothing of the incident.

The manager now, after giving the boy the hat and handkerchief, invited a committee to come forward and blindfold the medium who had been seated at the left of the stage. The committee first placed a lady's glove on the eyes of the medium as an additional precaution, and then placed a handkerchief over this and tied it behind his head. This method of blindfolding is the one usually employed by most mediums. If the face of the medium be properly formed, he can easily shift such a bandage with his eyebrows, sufficiently to see directly under his eyes, by looking down alongside his nose. The committee now retired to the audience, and the performer led the medium to a seat behind the table.

Now, while the manager delivered the lengthy lecture, the medium quietly tilted over the hat of envelopes behind the objects on the table; and then taking one at a time, opened the envelopes and removed the cards, arranging the cards on top of each other like a pack of playing cards. The lecture lasted long enough for the medium to complete this task; and as he held the cards in his left hand, he could now move slightly to the right so that he was pretty well in view of the spectators. However, his left hand did not come into view.

By the time the lecture was completed, the spectators had entirely forgotten the fact that the manager ever received the hat from the boy at all. In fact, next day I noticed from the talk of the spectators, that they invariably asserted that the hat never left the boy's hands or their sight.

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Now, while the manager held each envelope aloft, the medium had but to read the top card in his left hand and give the tests in a dramatic manner. After the tests, when the tables were set to one side and a cabinet erected, an assistant out of view received the cards from the medium's left hand; and then while behind the scenes, replaced them in envelopes, sealed them, and then exchanged these for the "dummy" envelopes on the small table. After the entertainment the manager placed the originals (now again sealed) near the front of the stage for the writers to take and keep as souvenirs if they should so desire.

It is evident that this method could be varied a little. For instance, when the manager holds the envelope aloft, the medium could first read it and carefully describe the writing. He could then ask for the envelope, so as to become en rapport with the writer, in order that he may give the correct answer. In this case he could leave the surplus cards on the back of the table behind the music box, and have in his left palm only the single card he is reading. When he receives the envelope he should place it in his left hand directly over the card and tear off the end of the envelope. He should then apparently take out the card from the envelope, but in reality take the original card from the rear of the envelope with his right hand. He should then with his right hand press this card on top of his head and give the answer, while his left hand lays the opened envelope on the table or music box. In this case, as soon as he answers the question, he should return the card to the manager with his right hand and ask the manager to have some boy run with it to its writer. After it is returned to its writer, the manager can hold aloft another envelope and the medium continue with the tests. After the tests, the manager should remove the torn envelopes, as they contain "dummy" cards.

I will now explain the method pursued on the second evening. After the questions were written and sealed, the manager went among the spectators collecting the envelopes in a cloth bag. He first numbered the envelopes, at the same time instructing each spectator to remember his number, after which the envelopes were dropped into the bag. When all the envelopes were collected, the manager lifted the bag in the tips of his fingers and ascended to the stage with it in plain view. He quickly attached it to the cord and drew it up to the ceiling. So far all was fair; but just at this moment a person in the rear of the hall made the statement that he desired to place his envelope in the bag also. The performer asked a gentleman on the floor to take the bag, which he now lowered and detached, and to kindly go to the gentleman and get his envelope. While he was doing this the manager held the audience by his discourse. The two gentlemen were, of course, paid confederates; and when they met behind the spectators, they merely exchanged the first bag for a duplicate under the coat of the rear confederate, who then slipped around behind the stage with the original.

When the other confederate returned to the stage with the duplicate bag and handed it to the manager he ran this one up to the ceiling. This method can be varied by the manager making the exchange under his own coat in the first place when in the rear of the hall after collecting the envelopes.

Meanwhile an assistant behind the scenes opened and copied the questions neatly on a sheet of paper, and NUMBERED EACH ONE. As he did this he slipped each one into a duplicate envelope, which was also numbered by the manager with a ring drawn around the figure. This he sealed. As soon as all were copied this assistant carefully drew the medium's Bible just out of sight from the table near the flies where it rested, inserted the sheet containing the copied questions, and pushed it back into view again.

During this time the medium was walking slowly about at the front of the stage while the manager delivered his lecture. At the close of the lecture the medium stepped back to the table where he had laid his Bible a short time before, picked it up and came forward taking a seat facing the audience. He next opened the Bible and turned the leaves over slowly, passing the sheet of paper and reading and memorizing the first question quickly. He then turned the leaves beyond this sheet of paper and finally selected a verse and began reading it impressively. As he read this verse he allowed the Bible to tilt forward sufficiently for the spectators to see that there was nothing like a loose sheet in it, should such an idea occur to anyone.

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As he had turned over other pages after secretly reading the question, the sheet was hidden from view. After reading the verse he allowed the Bible to close, and then closing his eyes gave the test for number one. After this he again opened the Bible and turned the leaves through it slowly, read the second question secretly, and finally found a second verse, which he proceeded to read in a solemn tone, he then gave a second test, and so continued until all the tests were given. He then lay down very much exhausted, and the manager lowered the cloth bag containing the dummy envelopes, and emptied them upon a small table near the front of the stage. He then stepped to the rear of the stage and picked up a little wicker basket, into which he scooped the dummy envelopes from the small table where they lay in full view. He now descended and rapidly returned the unopened envelopes to their respective writers.

The basket is what is known as a "Billet changing basket." It is lined with red satin and is a small affair with straight sloping sides. It has a handle which, when down, locks two flaps up against the sides of the basket. This is done by two little projections on the base ends of the handle. They are of wire and are bent into such shape that they project downward when the handle is down, and hold the two side flaps up against the sides. These flaps are of pasteboard, and are covered with red satin the same as the basket lining. There is a spring in each flap which closes it upon the bottom of the basket when it is released by raising the handle. Envelopes in the bottom of the basket are thus hidden and retained, when the flaps are released, and the duplicates drop into the basket, from the sides where they were concealed by the flaps.

This basket can be supplied by the conjuring depots, or it can easily be made. The handle can be made of wire and wrapped with raffia grass which is on sale at the department stores. A pasteboard lining covered with red satin must first be sewed into the basket, and then two flaps of pasteboard should be hinged to a pasteboard bottom by pasting on a hinge of cloth. A suitable spring can be made of spring wire and sewed into position, after which this is all covered with red satin and placed in the basket. The basket should have sides about four inches high, and the bottom should measure about seven and one-half by ten inches. The sides and ends slope outward, and the basket is open wicker work. Suitable bows of ribbon on the ends of the handle and corners of the basket conceal the mechanism.

In the present instance, the assistant behind the scenes, after reading and placing the questions in duplicate envelopes which the manager had previously numbered, sealed them and placed them in the sides of the basket, bent up the flaps into position, and lowered the handle locking them in place. He now pushed this basket into view on a table at the rear of the stage; and when the manager was ready to return the envelopes, he scooped the dummy envelopes from the table (where they lay after the bag was emptied) into this basket. He then lifted the handle which released the flaps, covered up the dummy envelopes and dropped the originals into view. These he took down and quickly distributed to the writers. Being numbered, this could be quickly done.

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I will now describe the method employed on the third evening. This time dummy envelopes were placed in the sides of the basket, and the handle left in a lowered position while the operator gathered up the envelopes. As the manager returned to the stage he took the basket by the handle. This released the dummy envelopes, and covered up the originals retaining them. He emptied the dummy envelopes upon the small table and then laid the basket on a table near the flies in the rear, and rather out of view. An assistant behind the scenes took out the original envelopes, opened them, and as he read the questions repeated them into a small telephone. The wires from this telephone ran under the stage carpet to a pair of metal plates with a tack in the center of each plate which pointed upward. These plates were located under certain spots in the carpet and directly in front of the medium's chair. There were also two other pairs of wires leading to two other positions on the stage. The medium was dressed as a "Mahatma" on this evening, wearing a large turban. A large tassel dangled by his left ear, completely concealing a small "watch-case receiver" which was attached to this ear. Two tiny wires led from this receiver, inside his collar, down his person, and were connected inside his shoes to other wires which penetrated the soles of his shoes. These latter wires were soldered to copper plates which were tacked into position on his shoe soles. He

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now took his position in the chair and placed his feet over the hidden tacks, which now contacted his shoe plates, completing the circuit, so that anything whispered into the telephone on the stage was repeated in his ear. He then gave a few tests, tapping his spirit bell, which was a signal for more information from the assistant.

He soon grew nervous and walked away giving a test as he walked. He now paused in a certain position for a moment, placing his hand to his head as if somewhat dazed and tapping his bell. In this position his feet were again over two concealed tacks, and he again secured information for another test, which he gave as he walked about. He now paused in a third position and gave another test, after which he returned to the chair, continuing his work. This maneuvering he kept up until all the tests were given; after which he fell upon a couch exhausted, but with his feet from the spectators.

The manager now stepped to the rear of the stage and took the basket, which was now in place containing the original (?) envelopes behind the flaps; and stepping to the small table he scooped in the dummy envelopes; then taking the basket by the handles, he stepped down the runway and rapidly returned the unopened (?) envelopes to their writers. The assistant had, of course, sealed the questions in duplicate envelopes previously numbered by the manager. He had placed these behind the flaps, and shoved the basket into view on a table at the rear of the stage.

I use a variation of these tricks in my double parlors. I have made a "billet changing basket" as above described, and have also made a similar basket except that it contains no mechanism.

I pass cards and envelopes to the spectators in the front parlor. When the questions are written and sealed in the envelopes, I gather them up in the mechanical basket; I step to a table in the rear parlor and apparently empty them upon it. In reality, I have just raised the handle so that the originals are retained, and the dummy envelopes are emptied on the table instead.

I now step to an adjoining room for an instant, to get a small decorated screen. I secretly leave the basket containing the original envelopes in this room and return with the other basket in my hand in its place. I place the small ornamental screen on the table back of the envelopes, but leave the envelopes in view and request the spectators to notice that I do not go near them until I get ready to give the tests. I now carelessly lay the non-mechanical basket on a table in the room where the spectators are and proceed with some other tricks.

Usually I give the series of experiments described in the chapter entitled "Mediumistic Reading of Sealed Writings." I state to the spectators that I will not give the tests for the sealed envelopes until later in the evening.

Meanwhile, should anyone think of such a thing, he can easily examine the little basket, which he thinks I have just used; as it still lies on the table in the front parlor with other discarded paraphernalia, including slates, etc. I use no assistant; so after a time has elapsed, and when by the performance of other sealed readings, suspicion has been diverted from the tests with the billets, my wife retires on some trifling errand. While out, she opens the envelopes in the basket, prepares the sheet of questions, and places it in the Bible; then she re-seals the questions in envelopes previously marked by me, places them in the sides of the basket, raises the flaps and lowers the handle. She then usually enters with some light refreshments for the spectators, which explains her absence with a word.

I continue with other experiments for ten or fifteen minutes after her return; then I gather up my surplus paraphernalia, including the dummy basket, and carry all to the room adjoining the back parlor, where I leave it. I return instantly with the mechanical basket which I place near my own table; and then I give another experiment of some kind.

I now pick up the basket and announce that I have decided to return to their writers the envelopes on the table in front of the screen before attempting to give the tests. I do this as if it were a later notion. I now scoop in the dummy envelopes, and raise the handle, which action covers them up and releases the originals (now sealed). I

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now distribute to the writers their envelopes, which I can do, as they are numbered as described earlier in this chapter. I request each sitter to hold his envelope until I shall give his test. Then I usually perform some other little experiment before giving the tests.

I now take up my Bible, which I will state I brought into the room, unnoticed, when I returned with the last basket. I then seat myself and leisurely turn the leaves through the Bible, reading verses, and giving the tests as before described.

I always first read a question secretly, and then turn by the sheet of paper and begin reading a verse of Scripture. As I do this I permit the front of the Bible to lower enough for the spectators to see the printed pages. This prevents suspicion. Meanwhile, the spectators have forgotten that I ever stepped from the room at all with the basket, and even that my wife retired for some refreshments. Neither did they notice the Bible when I brought it in.

The effect on each person, as I call him by name and describe the "influence" of his "dear one," giving names and most marvelous information, is far superior to what it would be were I merely to read the questions literally, and give the answers.