

INVESTIGATION OF AN ALLEGED POLTERGEIST CASE

MEL WILLIN

Background

AT A MEETING OF the Society for Psychical Research I was given a letter sent to the Secretary by Mrs R. H. concerning her son Dan's strange experiences [*N.B. pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identity of the participants — Ed.*]. The letter was intelligently and clearly typed and provided considerable information about the family background and nature of some 'unusual incidents'. These were centred on her twelve year old son and consisted of poltergeist-like activities.

I agreed to investigate the case and spoke to Mr H. on the phone to ask whether it would be possible to visit the family, to which he agreed. After a letter from myself and a further phone conversation we finalised a visit. I travelled to their house together with a graduate specialising in educational child psychology.

Interview

WE ARRIVED AT the family's large modern house to be greeted by Mr and Mrs H., who introduced us to their son, Dan. They suggested that he might prefer to speak to us without their presence and since he had no objection to this they left the room. Dan agreed to my taping the session to avoid having to make copious notes.

Dan made an instant impression upon us. He is extremely mature and sophisticated in his use of language and mannerisms in combination with being tall for his age and smart but casually dressed; he came across as a very charming, erudite and intelligent young man, who was considerably ahead of his years (he was not yet thirteen).

He spoke about his musical activities: he played piano (grade five) and the violin (which he had given up), but he didn't know what career he would take up after leaving school. I asked him whether he could recount his experiences for us, to which he readily agreed. He said he found it all "rather odd"; that he would "never forget" what was happening to him and he had no idea why he was witnessing such things other than that he was like his

grandfather had been as a little boy. He was "a bit scared at first" but was now quite used to it, although he said they "got on his nerves" at times. He spoke of various phenomena that had started a few months before. Only his relations knew about his experiences since he thought his friends at school would think he was crazy. (One incident happened at school when a door kept opening of its own accord and the teacher allegedly said it must be a poltergeist.)

He has received written messages written in toothpaste and saying 'HELP' and another in pencils spelling out his name. His parents showed us photographs of these and Dan's father vouched that one of the messages — spelt out in toothpaste in a hotel bathroom when none of them was present — could not have been produced by Dan himself. The other message of 'HELP' was written in toothpaste in the family's spare room and it also had a photograph with it of his great uncle's wedding. Dan claimed not to know where these messages had come from. A photograph of his great uncle (hereafter called 'Gerry') which appeared on the floor of his bedroom was normally kept at his grandparents' house. (*N.B.* Gerry had earlier suffered a stroke and sadly died on the day of our arrival at the house.) Both Dan and his parents believe that he might have been the cause of some of the phenomena, but curiously they did not seem too upset by his very recent demise, and even invited us to visit the grandparents *that day* if we wished. For the sake of decency we declined. A child's handprints were also visible on Dan's bedroom wall. Their origin was unknown and the prints were much smaller than Dan's own hands.

The first phenomenon was a loud popping sound that was regularly heard at Dan's grandparents' house by different people. Plumbers and electricians were unable to locate the source of the sounds. Eventually Dan's father found the cause to be a toy pistol which was evidently firing by itself when Dan was in the house but not in possession of the gun. We inspected the gun (which had been removed from the grandparents' house) and found it to be a very robust pump-action pistol requiring a

good deal of force to load and was not easily concealed.

Other activities have included a picture apparently falling over of its own accord; a thermostat being continually turned up; lights flashing; a calendar falling off a wall and having pins stuck in the date November 14; Dan's grandfather's diary having the same date scribbled in. Dan also found his grandparents' keys when they had been lost outside their house. He said "I could see them under a stone". In his own home, the power was switched off at the mains when Dan was watching television in the front room and his parents were upstairs. Dan denied having done this, and the switch was in a difficult position to get at quickly and easily.

When he was sharing a room with his father at his other grandparents' house in Cardiff, a book was thrown across the room at his father on several occasions. The father later confirmed to us that he could not see how Dan could have done this himself. Dan told us that he would like to control this energy but he had not yet tried to. He spoke of Uri Geller, whom he had met at a local festival, during which a spoon he had held in his own hand had bent.

Dan also told us about figures he had seen outside the house, and on one occasion inside. He also saw them when he was on holiday in Italy with his father, where he also saw a whole old-fashioned street scene, including two adults and three children dressed according to the time, whom he recognised as his grandfather's parents and his grandfather as a child. One of the figures was wearing a brooch that is now kept at his grandparents' house. They appeared to be solid and when looking at Dan their expressions changed. He mentioned that when he tried to speak to them he felt a sharp pain in his head. The figures are often around, he says, but no-one else can see them. He has been given the names Gerry and Giles Brown in relation to them, although these names previously meant nothing to him.

Dan left the room to find the photographs he had told us about, and while he was away his father returned to talk to us in private. He told us that Giles Brown was a great friend of Gerry and that the latter had once saved the former's life after a heart attack. However, latterly Gerry's wife would not allow him to contact Giles, since he was very old and she felt that he should not be disturbed. Dan's

father felt that some of the phenomena might be in some way to do with this. He said that he was "very sceptical" about the events and that Dan could have been responsible for most of them himself, although not *all* of them. He believed that Dan primarily witnessed these things when he was under stress, mainly at his grandparents' house but also at home in his presence.

He gave us further information about Dan, telling us that he had always been very mature and seemed at ease with elderly people. Other comments that give an insight into Dan's character included "he is a Roman Catholic", "he is very strong", "He loves Office World", "he is lazy but great company", and "sometimes he is childlike and he plays with his toy cars". I asked about girlfriends and was told that there was a female pen pal that he had met on holiday in Spain with his father.

Mrs H. returned and commented that she hadn't believed what was going on at first, but now she knew it was real. She said that Dan had changed a lot in the last six months (perhaps as a result of the onset of puberty), but that his reaction to the phenomena was typically low-key. He never threw tantrums and was usually quite placid. He wasn't particularly interested in paranormal matters but was more keen on MI5 and 'Area 51'.

They showed us Dan's bedroom, which was unlike any other twelve-year-old's that we had ever seen. It resembled an executive's office, complete with leather swivel chair, desk with name plate, computer and office furniture. They told us that he dealt with their bills, logging them into the computer. There was none of the typical paraphernalia of a teenage child. We inspected the handprints and were also shown various photographs of the messages given to Dan.

In a further session with all three present, they assured us that there was no medical history of mental problems and that Dan did not take drugs. I put it to Dan that he could be faking the phenomena, and he replied — with a certain amount of humour — that of course he was! (It was clear that he did not expect us to take this 'confession' seriously.) To conclude the interview, I suggested that they might like to keep a diary of any unusual events and that I would discuss the case with my colleagues and possibly make a return visit in due course. We wondered whether the phenomena would stop

now that Gerry had died. They were happy for us to make a return visit, and even suggested that we meet up later in a local pub for a drink, which of course we accepted!

Discussion

DAN IS AN EXTREMELY sophisticated 'child' — one hesitates to use such a word in describing him because of his apparent maturity. He spends a great deal of time at his grandparents' house, and would appear to rarely spend time together with both of his parents; his father is away for most of the week teaching in Cardiff and his parents prefer to holiday separately, with Dan accompanying his father. When we met the parents at the pub they arrived separately with their friends.

In my mind there are two possible explanations for this case:

- The phenomena reported are genuine
- The phenomena are being prepared by Dan

Because there is no hard evidence of the former at present, this case cannot be reported as providing strong evidence of poltergeist or other paranormal activity. Dan in particular may be lying about the events described, and his parents may have been duped by a clever and mischievous son. His motive might well be to test how far he can fool his parents, grandparents, and now a psychical researcher! I do not believe that any of his relatives are involved in any deception that might be occurring, although they may be guilty of naïvety.

Post script

IT HAS BEEN over a year since this case was originally investigated, and there has been no further contact from Dan's parents beyond an occasional e-mail to inform me that nothing unusual has happened in the interim period. Perhaps our visit was responsible for this in some way.

THE GIFTED MEDIUMS FURORE

MONTAGUE KEEN

THIS WAS INTENDED to be a sober summary of a conference held at Tucson, Arizona as a follow-up to the publication in our *Journal* in January of Gary and Linda Schwartz's paper on experiments with highly skilled mediums. Of necessity, the international furore which this seems to have sparked calls for a more extensive review.

Having heard of the Schwartz experiment some eighteen months earlier (and given a paper on it at our 1999 conference), I was anxious to ensure that the formal findings of Schwartz and his colleagues would be published in the *JSPR*. After the lengthy battering process known as peer review, it was due to appear by the end of January, although circumstances irritatingly delayed its actual availability to mid-March. The SPR Council was not happy about the precedent involved in issuing a press release, so I gave a well-known science writer, one of the rare breed not wholly ignorant of or prejudiced against our subject, Robert Matthews, advance notice of the paper,

although the considerable pre-publication publicity might just as securely have alerted him.

This resulted in a useful and generally sympathetic account in the *Sunday Telegraph*, albeit with a mildly puzzled comment by sceptic Dr Chris French. More critical comments came in a letter the following week from Dr Richard Wiseman, but the paper failed to publish Schwartz's (or anyone else's) corrections to what were perceived as misconceptions by Wiseman. The *Daily Mail* promptly followed the *Sunday Telegraph* piece with a couple of feature articles, one pro-Schwartz from Colin Wilson, and the other from its Science reporter, accompanied by another and more substantial Wiseman criticism, founded on the belief that the answers could have been based on guesswork, Dr Wiseman not having seen the evidence on which such an assumption might prove warranted.