

The Ghost Hunters

No one saw the girl die. It was just a little too early, a morning still too dark, first light barely warming the edge of the sky. The night frost yet shimmered on the ground, faint ghostly silver. It was barely 6 a.m. on a late October morning. Sixteen-year-old Bertha Huse was out for a walk before her day's work at the mill. Her parents and her sister were still asleep in the small house they shared in Enfield, New Hampshire.

Later, a few of the town people, those like the blacksmith's wife who were up doing morning chores, recalled seeing the girl go by. Bertha was walking a little slowly, tying her bonnet as she went. She left footprints in the frosty dirt road. The marks led toward an old wooden bridge, made of rough timbers and without railings, which spanned Mascoma Lake. The lake looked untouched. It always did. The water beneath the bridge was 18 feet deep. Darkened by the thick local soil, it shone like a black mirror, reflecting all light away.

When their child didn't come home, her parents were at first puzzled. Then a little worried. And slowly, as the sky lightened and the morning filled, they became frantic. They were out calling for her, hunting along the empty road and the shores of the silent lake. As it became obvious, that something was really wrong, their friends and neighbors joined in. By day's end, some 150 people had joined in, calling ever louder, rattling through empty thickets and fields. More and more of them glancing toward the polished blank of the water.

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Finally, the mill owner himself sent for a diver from Boston to explore around Shaker Bridge. The diver, suited against the cold of the lake, slid down, disappearing himself like a stone beneath the surface. But he found no trace of the girl. There was no trace anywhere; the frost footprints had long melted away. It was as if Bertha had vanished into the dawn itself. There was nothing – except the nightmare that caused a woman in a nearby town to start screaming in her sleep.

It was two days after the girl had vanished. George and Nellie Titus lived almost five miles away, in Lebanon. By horse and unpaved road, that was a wider distance than today. Still, George worked at the mill too. The workers spread the word. Everyone knew - and worried - about a missing child. The Tituses talked it over, wondered if they could help.

After supper, Nellie Titus went upstairs, and curled into a rocking chair for a nap, pulling a blanket over herself. She was asleep when her husband came up the stairs but she was sitting almost bolt upright, her hands wringing in her lap, and her breath coming in gasps. She screamed. Alarmed, he reached over and shook her awake. Her eyes looked unfocused. But her voice was sharp and unhappy. “Oh, George,” she said. “Why did you wake me?” A little deeper into the dream, she said, she could have told him where that girl was. He shook his head. It was a nightmare, he said, you were screaming. “Don’t wake me again,” she insisted. “No matter what I do in my sleep.”

The dreams haunted them both for another day. Bertha Huse had disappeared on a Monday morning. That Thursday, George Titus gave up sleep at 1 a.m. He lit a lamp and turned to toward his wife. She was shivering now, teeth chattering. “Are you cold Nellie?” he asked as he pulled the quilt up. “Oh, oh, I am awfully cold,” she answered

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and then she slid silent down into the bed. When she woke, the dawn was once again breaking against the blackness of the night. We have to go to Shaker Bridge, she told her husband.

He was almost too exhausted to argue. And anyway she was scaring him. Titus went to the stable where he kept a horse and told the stable master, almost casually, that his wife had dreamed the answer to the missing girl. The man laughed but George Titus shook his head and recounted what she had told him. That Bertha Huse had first appeared in the dream standing on the bridge, hesitating about which way to go. She was standing on a frost-covered log, looking back toward the village. Her foot slipped and she went backwards into the lake. It was about at this point in the dream, he thought, that his wife had begun shaking with cold.

The Titus's drove their buggy onto the bridge. He counted out five or six yards before she asked to stop. Nellie Titus walked to edge. "There," she said. "She's between those logs." He could see nothing but the polished surface of the water, black and glossy as obsidian. He stared at his watery reflection. There was one other thing that he knew, that he hadn't told his friend at the stable. Nellie was the granddaughter of a known psychic. She didn't claim to be one herself. But she'd had these kind of dreams before. They always left her physically ill. She hated them. They came anyway, slipping past her defenses as she slept.

The couple tracked down George Whitney, who was heading up the search team and he – frustrated and desperate - called in the diver. The diver was a slim, wiry Irishman named Brian Sullivan; Sullivan thought they were all crazy. He worked for the Boston Tow-Boat Company and he'd been diving for bodies for years. Bodies were sometimes

hard to find, that's all. That was reality. Dreams weren't. Whitney told him that he didn't believe in such dreams either. They were rational men, he reminded Sullivan, they didn't believe in ghosts in the night?

But Whitney knew there might be people in the village who were less "rational". There were those who did believe in visiting spirits. And, he told Sullivan, "As long as we had started to do all we could to recover the body, we ought to at least give this woman a chance." The villagers were searching the woods as well, without result. No one had yet the faintest idea where the girl was. Sullivan continued arguing with Whitney, but less strenuously. He wanted to send to Boston for blasting powder and set off an explosion that would shake the girl's body loose from the lake bottom, if it was there. He told Whitney that he was willing to take orders – but he did not want to make a fool of himself splashing in and out of the lake while Mrs. Titus spouted mystical nonsense and pointed at assorted dream spots. Whitney agreed. He had no intention of looking ridiculous either. They would give her one chance only.

Nellie Titus walked on the bridge again and stood again at the first spot they had stopped. She shook her head. No, she said, not quite right. She walked a few more feet and leaned forward a little, staring down into the lake. "Here," she said. Sullivan put on his dive suit and dropped a guideline, tied to a sinker, down into the water. The lake was so dark that once under water he could see nothing. Mrs. Titus told him that the girl was wedged upside down, but one foot was sticking up, shod in a rubber boot. Sullivan slid down ten feet into the black of the water, feeling his way down the bridge structure. Something bumped his face. He fumbled to feel it. It was a foot. His hand slid over the rubber boot and down a leg and he began to pull. He tied the guideline round the body

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and came for air. “She’s here,” he shouted. George Whitney nodded. “I know,” he said. Bertha’s bonnet had come floating to the surface as Sullivan tugged her loose from the logs.

Later, at the inn tavern in Lebanon, Sullivan told his story to a fascinated crowd. Wasn’t he afraid? someone asked, when he was down there in the pitch-black with the girl’s body bumping his face? No, he answered. “It is my business to recover bodies in the water and I am not afraid of them.” But he feared something else – or, rather, someone else. He was unnerved the how precisely Nellie Titus had described the location of the body. They wouldn’t have found it without her, he said; he couldn’t even see the body when he was floating next to it. What power did she have that a dead girl walked in her dreams? “In this instance, I was afraid of the woman on the bridge.”

Voices of the Dark

The woman on the bridge, though, drew another audience, one that would see her as much more than an oddity. Her story caught the attention of one of the most eminent psychologists of the day. The story lives today through him, in all its precise and unsettling detail because after that incident in the fall of 1898, he collected the information and he published it in a journal. He was a scientist, trained in the United States and in Europe, and meticulous about building up evidence. He gathered interviews from Sullivan and Whitney and the Tituses. He talked to the local doctor, the mill owner, the blacksmith’s wife who had seen Bertha walking in the morning, William Sunderlin, the stable master. He investigated the possibility of fraud by Mrs. Titus. Could she have

been mysteriously lurking by the bridge at dawn? Could Bertha have planned a precise suicide and told her? He cited the family's baffled gratitude, that this stranger, with some "God-given power" had been able to help them.

In his report, the psychologist himself reached a conclusion, carefully phrased, incendiary in nature: "My own view of the Titus case consequently is that it is a decidedly solid document in favor of the admission of a supernormal faculty of seership." Solid evidence, then, that a housewife in New Hampshire could communicate with the dead? Solid evidence that ghosts can visit in our dreams? It was a risky, stand on the cliff-edge kind of public stand for a psychologist to take, even in the late 19th century. He knew that, of course, every working researcher knew that. Plenty of scientists had lost their credibility in the very cause. American psychologist Frederick Schiller remembered having a once eminent chemist pointed out to him and being told, "that he *had* been a brilliant scientist but that recently he had unfortunately gone off his head, and lapsed into spiritualism."

Like the chemist, the psychologist who reported the Huse case also had a reputation worth protecting. Born into a wealthy and influential Boston family, he was a professor at Harvard University, the author of the most respected text on psychology published in the United States, a founder of the American Psychological Association. He was 56 years old and acclaimed as one of the leading intellects of his time. He was beginning to make a name for himself, not only as a psychologist but also as a philosopher of depth and power. He would become, in the words of Louis Menand's best-selling book, *The Metaphysical Club*, one of the most influential thinkers in "moving American thought into the modern world."

And yet William James wrote and published the report on Nellie Titus' haunted dreams and he called them evidence of a power beyond the ordinary. He did it at a time when believing in ghostly visitations was considered anything but modern. He weighed the professional costs and then he joined in one of the most extraordinary endeavors in psychology, perhaps the greatest ghost hunt ever undertaken in the history of science. Other researchers have pursued ESP and ghostly visitations and such questions as whether prayer promotes healing. But this endeavor, beginning in the late 19th century and continuing into the dawn of the 20th, stands out. At no other time have scientists of the caliber of James and his colleagues joined in such an ambitious search for powers beyond the every day.

They received nothing in the way of professional rewards. The field of psychology, in particular, was perilously new and uncertain and its members worried constantly about being perceived as less than rigorous. Imagine their dismay when James, one of the founding members of the American Psychological Association, took up the search for the spirit world. "We cannot follow him into a quagmire" worried one fellow psychologist. Another dismissed James as not a scientist at all, just "an impressionist." James hated the ridicule, he grouched about the publicity. He resented the suggestion that he was gullible. And then he decided he could live with it. So did his friends; alienation, they found, was survivable. If anything it pricked them to push harder, they would, somehow, show the doubters.

Under pressure, the psychical researchers grew closer, a band of brothers, and sisters, working together, both patiently and not, to prove their choice a good one. It was James who counseled patience. Let us get it right first, he insisted, and announce it afterwards.

“Let our work *reek* of integrity, “ agreed his colleague, Edmund Gurney. When they’d really made their case, James thought, they would turn the profession of science upside down. “The world won’t be converted for many years. When it is converted, we shall seem all the more dignified and sublime to have been so imperturbable. the stuff will keep; and the bigger the bomb to be exploded at once in the proceedings, the greater the shock...”

This sometimes secretive, professionally risky, wildly ambitious endeavor forms the heart of the story I want to tell in *The Ghost Hunters*. It rests on a unique and often courageous scientific quest to find a life beyond. That quest brought its followers right up against the limits of science. What they pursued – and what they found - raises questions as fascinating today as they were then. The first, obviously, is whether there is any bright bit of hope that we really can talk to the dead. Beyond that, the hunt for spirit life illuminates the conflict between the tangible and the intangible, the world we can measure precisely, and the world we cannot. And this search in particular, at this moment in time, provides a wonderfully dramatic view of the two value systems in collision.

William James is perhaps the hero – definitely the primary scientist in my story – but no one could call him a lonely figure in this search. Those he worked with are less well known today. But in their time, many were also high profile scientists and philosophers. Their credibility elevates what might be just a good ghost story, an adventure from the history of science, into an intellectually provocative mystery: what did they really find? So that the central argument of *The Ghost Hunters* may be a challenge to the rest of us.

Have we dismissed that long ago research too easily? What if some of their discoveries were real? What actually has been left behind by modern psychology?

These scientists aimed high, after all. They wanted to discover the source of ‘light’ – as psychics of the time called it – the ability to see the gleam of the world beyond this one. They hoped to prove that the dead live on and that they do not forget those left behind. They believed that they were building a case worth hearing. And so did many other people.

In fact, if there ever was a moment for science to engage itself in an ambitious spirit hunt, this was the time. It was true that researchers seemed to be aligned against the old religious explanations of the world. But the late 19th century culture was one of extraordinary faith in its own powers. Could not people communicate across hundreds of miles with the click of telegraph key? If words could hum across continents could they not hum across the space between this world and the next? If science could make people feel set adrift in an indifferent universe, could it not anchor them in a more personal one?

The concept of psychical powers beckoned across the spectrum of education and class and wealth. Both Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-developers of the theory of evolution, attended séances and encouraged research into the subject. Wallace himself even dabbled in psychical studies, carefully recording his impressions of séances and the approaches of various mediums. Other allies in the hunt included the chemist William Crookes, discoverer of thallium; the physicists Michael Faraday and William Barrett and Lord Rayleigh; the American astronomer Simon Newcombe, the secretary of the Smithsonian, J.P. Langley. There were politicians. William Gladstone, who served as

British prime minister, described psychical research as “the most important work, which is being done in the world. By far the most important.”

There were even literary luminaries such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the latter who summed up his hopes thus: *"The Ghost in Man, the Ghost that once was Man /But cannot wholly free itself from Man /Are calling to each other thro' a dawn/Stranger than the earth has ever seen; the veil/ Is rending, and the Voices of the day/Are heard across the Voices of the dark."*

Brothers in the Borderlands

Beyond that common desire, to do good research in what William James called “the borderlands of science”, the ghost hunters were an unlikely and sometimes volatile mix of personalities. Foremost was James, with his passionate dedication to open inquiry, his impatience with the patient, and his natural inclination toward uncertainty. It outraged him that the science of psychology, still so young, was mired already in orthodoxy. He felt surrounded by dogma, hedged in by plodders. Shouldn't psychology stretch our understanding of being human rather than merely monitor it? He didn't deny the need for objective observation: “Science means, first of all, a certain dispassionate method.” But he added, “To suppose that it means a certain set of results that one should pin one's faith upon and hug forever is sadly to mistake its genius, and degrades the scientific body

to the status of a cult.” There’s no denying that the wholly off-center, doubt-ridden search for the otherworld suited him perfectly.

It’s worth providing brief portraits of his colleagues as well because they were a fascinating crew.

There was Richard Hodgson, dark-headed, energetic - a native Australian, a natural athlete and, in the beginning, a ruthless skeptic. Hodgson was at first famed as a medium buster. He traveled in a journey of both boat and camel to India to expose the then-famed psychic, Olga Blavatsky, a spiritualist star of the 1870s. Once he had tracked her down – and she did keep moving - Hodgson picked apart a huge and ornate cabinet, into which she claimed that spirits placed letters, and found it to be a marvel of false drawers and secret compartments. Hodgson was so successful in showing her up as a fraud that he ended her career. Yet when the British Psychical Research association sent him to the United States to check out some notable American mediums, he slowly became a convert.

There was James Hyslop, slim, bearded, convinced that they needed a wide public forum. Hyslop frequently irritated his colleagues by courting publicity. He was a natural grandstander. He would visit mediums unannounced and unidentified. He would often wear a black hooded mask over his face. He would listen without comment to the mystical proceedings and then stalk silently out of the room, back to his carriage, which he often had parked blocks away. He and William James, who loathed the publicity, quarreled over each other’s methods. James complained that the resulting newspaper coverage made them sound like a bunch of cranks, drawn together by “soft-headedness and idiotic credulity.” Hyslop fired back that James needed to toughen up and show a

little public backbone. They were sometimes furious with each other; they wrote each other letters rich with invective. But neither of them quit – on each other, or the quest itself.

These three - the performer, the detective, the philosopher - formed the core of the American Society for Psychical Research. It was closely linked, and eventually merged, with the British Society for Psychical Research. The Cambridge philosopher, Henry Sidgwick, known for his gentle voice and his hard head, led the British group. James called him “the most incorrigibly and exasperatingly critical and skeptical mind in England.”

Even critics agreed that Sidgwick’s determinedly objective attitude helped launch the SPR with real credibility. Sidgwick worked closely with his wife Eleanor, a tiny, delicately built woman with the same tough-minded approach as her husband. Nora Sidgwick was quiet and reserved but she was a brilliant woman; she collaborated with John William Strutt, Lord Rayleigh, on papers on the mathematical sciences. (Rayleigh won the Nobel Prize in 1904 for his investigations of the density of gases and for the discovery of the element, argon.) Mrs. Sidgwick eventually became regarded as one of the most thorough investigators in the group.

The British association’s secretary was a fair-haired and elegant scholar named Edmund Gurney. The novelist George Eliot once described Gurney as a man whose beautiful face matched his beautiful mind. As with many of the members – barring Hodgson who had no money at all and was kept poor through his underpaid service to psychical research – Gurney was a wealthy intellectual. Like his colleagues, he thought that this privileged position carried a duty to do something meaningful. The possibilities

of life beyond life definitely seemed to satisfy that need. Gurney became the group's first official collector of ghost stories, which he gathered in a two-volume publication, *Phantasms of the Living*. He once told William James that it was the weight of those many hauntings that convinced him that he was not merely playing an intellectual game. He was doing something real; it mattered.

The two other most influential British characters in this story are the physicist, Sir Oliver Lodge, and the Cambridge-educated poet and philosopher, Frederic Myers. Of all of them, Myers wanted most to believe in the reachable afterworld. He had personal reasons for pursuing phantoms, one in particular. Myers was a man who loved women. He was notoriously unfaithful to his wife. He sometimes slept with mediums under study, at least if they were young and attractive. And he was obsessed with a lover who had committed suicide. He wanted desperately to contact his lost Annie. Driven by guilt and by need and by hope, Myers became the group's bloodhound, so determined in the research that James once commented that Myers made him feel exhausted and exuberant at once. "Beneath a strange disguising," he wrote James in 1897, "these are mighty days; remember them well! For we shall be called upon to tell their story long hence in an unimaginable world."

Later in his life, Oliver Lodge would also hope, desperately, to contact the dead. He too would eventually be driven by grief and loss. But this would be after World War I, after his son Raymond was killed in battle. When they first met, Lodge was almost a polar opposite to Myers. No poetic imagery and the romantic longings for him. He was a professor of physics. Lodge studied the motions of electrons, experimented with wireless communication. Most people have forgotten, but Oliver Lodge made the first radio

transmission on record, about a year before Marconi. From 1881 to 1900 he was professor of physics at University College, Liverpool; he went on to spend another 20 years at the University of Birmingham. In 1902 he was knighted in recognition of his service to science.

Why would a physicist join the search for the spirit world? Lodge first joined for diplomatic reasons. He was interested in a particular truce, the reconciling science and religion. There were many in this dawn of the age of Darwin, who feared that modern science and its cold-hearted view of life could only undermine the faith-based explanations of religion. In the 1850s, the noted conservative essayist John Ruskin wrote despairingly of the discovery of fossil layer after fossil layer, each one peeling back the age of the Earth. Each one directly contradicting the Biblical timelines: “If only the geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses.”

If science accepts only what can be measured, tested, proved according to the rules of human observation, then what does it do with the events that don't fit? How much does an emphasis on the random deliberately ignore? If the scientific explanation of the world refuses to consider alternate explanations is it still science, or as James once suggested, in danger of becoming a kind of religion itself? “This rigorous belief that in its own essential and innermost nature, our world is a strictly impersonal world, may, conceivably, as the whirligig of time goes round, prove to be the very defect that our descendents will be most surprised at in our own boasted science,” James wrote once, in pure exasperation. Myers put it differently – more personally – but his point was the same. He hoped to prove the universe was “friendly”, he said. He hoped for a promise of

life and warmth that frozen nebula and interstellar dust clouds could never offer. Not a random universe at all – out in the borderlands of science, the quest was on for a personal universe and a connected one.

The Haunted World

But before Tennyson began listening for voices of the dark, before chemists and physicists could be persuaded, before James and his colleagues could believe there was something to hunt, there had to first be the ghosts themselves. There could be no ghost hunters, without ghost stories, which is one of the aspects that makes this particular tale such a pleasure to tell.

Almost as long as people had been had been telling stories, there had always been those that were just, well, creepy. Not just the outrageous ones, the specter hovering above the tombstone variety, but the bumps in the night. The truly unnerving ones were those that seemed to hover right at the edge of reality, the unexplained tapping on windows in the night, the flickering of a face, the whispering sound of a stranger's voice in the dark.

In every culture, in every time period, there were the visions and the specters and the shadows that were somehow just a little too solid and a little too real. There were the mediums and the healers and the psychics who seemed to know things that they really shouldn't know, and the houses where even empty rooms could seem occupied. There was the family who kept encountering a pale, soft-voiced man, hunting for a lost object in

their home: "It isn't here," he would tell them mournfully before fading away. There was the psychologist – also a ghost hunter - who led a team of researchers into the servants' quarters of a home famed for an ancient murder, only to have his whole party flee. Years later, he said he had it was the only time in his life when he had such a tangible sense of evil. He remembered best his dog trembling at the bottom of the stairs.

And as Hodgson wrote to James, he had, a still potent memory from when he was a student at Oxford University. "I had just blown out my candle, which stood on a small table close by when I felt my left forearm seized by a hand. I was lying on my right side with my eyes shut and blanket over me, the grasp felt as if made from within the blanket. I thrust up violently with my left arm and jerked myself in a sitting position ready to strike and with my might." But the hand was gone. The student fumbled for a match, to relight the candle, knocked the whole bedside table over, and when he finally was able to get some illumination, saw nothing but the flicker of shadows in the room and heard nothing but his own quick breathing. And yet, he said, the sensation stayed with him. His encounter lacked menace but not power: "It is not unlike the emotional effect of a wondrous poem or scene or blossom of music. There is a sure knowledge of the close and brooding presence of a mighty person and after it has gone, the memory of it persists as the one perception of reality. Everything else may be a dream, but not that."

These encounters weren't isolated. They weren't rare. They were among hundreds. Thousands even. Was it worth asking whether all those ghost stories added up to a kind of body of evidence? Indeed, as James pointed out, the possibilities seemed to swirl about

them like a sandstorm. “Round about the accredited and orderly facts of every science there ever floats a sort of dust-cloud of observations, and of occurrences minute and irregular and seldom met with, which it always proves more easy to ignore than to attend to,” he said. “Orthodox psychology turns its back on them. Medicine sweeps them out; or at most, when in anecdotal vein, records a few of them as “effects of the imagination...All the while, however, the phenomena are there, lying broadcast over the surface of history.”

So what if scientists actually ventured into the cloud, examined those eerie sensations and premonitions and visitations that seemed to never go away. This became one of the first challenges that the psychical researchers took up. They began sifting through the reports of ghostly encounters, collecting them, evaluating them, rejecting the loosest stories, and critically and thoroughly describing those that passed muster. There has never been a better, more thorough, more scrupulous efforts to sort through the ghost stories and eerie encounters that circulate than that done by these ghost hunters. They produced two books, which may be considered the best collections of ghost stories that exist today. More than that they considered these stories evidence and it’s definitely worth taking a look at what they considered worth keeping.

The first of these books was Edmund Gurney’s *Phantasms of the Living*, the collected work that had convinced the author that he and his friends were genuinely on to something. Gurney and Eleanor Sidgwick toiled together on these investigations. They surveyed some 17,000 people in Britain in what he called a “census of hallucinations.” People were randomly selected. They were then asked whether they had ever “heard a

voice, seen a form, or felt a touch which no material presence could explain. “About one in ten reported such a contact and most of them were connected to the death of a friend of a family member.

Gurney and Nora Sidgwick then ruthlessly eliminated most of these stories. They threw out anything too vague, any tale too theatrical, any tale by a person who also claimed extraordinary powers. What they had left were several hundred accounts by people who seemed uniformly bewildered and shaken. I won't recount them all here, but here is typical example, told with in the kind of careful detail that the psychical researchers preferred:

A businessman from the small British town of Chalford told of a memorable trip to Canada in 1867 in which he attended the opera with a Toronto merchant. The men were sitting together in the dress circle. Suddenly, a man in the pit below attracted the Englishman's attention, looking up toward them. He leaned forward for another look. “Good God! There is my brother,” he exclaimed to his companion. His brother was supposedly in China at the time. The other man leaned forward as well but could not see anyone looking up toward their box. The British merchant, John Evans, recalled being so excited that he rushed down to the pit to find his brother. He wasn't there. In fact, there was no one in the pit who even resembled his brother. “I am not superstitious or a Spiritualist,” he told Gurney. But he could not get over that vanished man, who seemed so exactly like his brother. When he returned to England, he learned that his brother had recently died at the French Hospital in Shanghai. The evening of his death – once the time zone differences were taken into account – was the night of the visit to the opera.

As was the habit of SPR researchers, Gurney approached every such story as if the teller was a criminal suspect. He insisted on a death certificate from China and even the opera schedule from Toronto before including the story in his book. James once commented that if he was going to name a group of researchers “where hard-headedness and never-sleeping suspicion of sources of error might be seen in their full bloom” he would have to pick the psychical researchers. Despite throwing out thousands of suspected hauntings, when Gurney and Sidgwick tallied their supportable ghost stories, they calculated that these death-day appearances occurred some 400 times more often than chance.

Some of their best work would be done in the next decade. It was in this period that William James documented the dreams of Nellie Titus and the body in the lake. Myers and Lodge continued their hunt for honest mediums. The analysis of ghost stories almost came to halt when Gurney died of a chloroform overdose. He had been taking the drug as a sleeping aid and apparently inhaled too much. His friends were so distraught that for a while they simply halted his work. But, finally, Nora Sidgwick restarted Gurney’s detailed, cautious sifting of evidence into a companion book, *Phantasms of the Dead*, which explores the claims of people who believe they’ve seen the ghosts of strangers, rather than friends and family, such as pale drift of the man searching for his missing property.

In a sense, though, this was passive psychical research – waiting for the dead to make an appearance. The ghost hunters weren’t quite as patient as that. They wanted to try to reach the ghostly others. They had a working theory, not so different from proposals of today, about what might allow such interactions. James and his friends theorized that

whatever the connections were between this world and the next, they were rare and extraordinarily unstable. They imagined them almost like some spectral form of electrical energy, a kind of unsteady current, leaping and flashing and sizzling, out of anyone's real control on either side. The dead had enormous difficulty conveying their messages and some of them, perhaps, never made it through. The "will to communicate" had to endure through the barriers that might logically lie between the different worlds, what James called "inconceivable layers of obstruction." At best, odd bits and pieces of information might result.

And, then, the living had to struggle to receive that shaky, unreliable signal. Hodgson once compared the situation to two people trying to communicate using only drunken servants to carry the message and to receive it. Perhaps recent death strengthened the ability to send or to receive. If so, they wondered if this had to do with energy – a sharpening, a focus, driven perhaps by a desperate need, in the last moments of life to get a last message across. Perhaps we have natural defenses against such peculiar bursts of energy and spectral imagines creeping into safety of ordinary life. Perhaps only in moments of extreme crisis – the trauma of death – do those barriers slip a little.

Conversations with the Dead

Perhaps, also, there are a few people whose defenses are naturally low. It could be that we live in a world alive with messages and energies that we cannot see or hear. Some

of us may never connect. Others may in rare moments. And there may be rare individuals who are somehow naturally more open. Would this be a gift or a curse? James imagined a breach in the natural wall that buffers us against the alternative worlds. By this argument, most of us keep the ghosts out and never know it. For others, the ghosts may easily visit. A Nellie Titus might be one of those people without such defenses, so that whether she would or not, a dead girl could walk in her dreams. Mrs. Titus struggled against such messages. She refused to be a practicing psychic.

But there were others more comfortable with that supposed breach in the wall. They needed a practicing psychic, someone who could really be studied. In James' view, they needed one perfectly credible, perfectly studied medium to make their case. Just one. As he put it: "If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you must not seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white."

His own white crow, he said, was a Boston-based medium named Leonora Piper. They were an unlikely match, the New England intellectual aristocrat and the high-school educated wife of a department store salesman. Yet Leonora Piper was described by everyone who met her as a lady. She had a soft-voice, a shy manner, and such a tidy, unobtrusive way of dressing that you wouldn't have noticed her on crowded street. To the day of her own death, Mrs. Piper said she didn't understand where her abilities came from or what they meant. They just were.

James met Leonora Piper in the fall of 1885. His wife's mother had gone to see her out of pure curiosity (she'd never seen a medium and she had a friend who was very enthusiastic). She'd been shocked when the medium began to discuss her family in accurate detail. She promptly dragged one of her daughters back to the Piper house. This

time the sitting went even better. After holding a letter, Mrs. Piper was accurately able to describe the writer. This would not have been easy if she'd been allowed to open the letter. The writer was Italian and the letter written in that language. Mrs. Piper didn't know Italian and didn't know the two people who had read the letter. James confessed that he entertained himself by arguing with his female relatives about the possible tricks that would allow a medium to produce that description. "This did not, however, prevent me from going myself a few days later, in company with my wife, to get a direct personal impression."

William and his wife, Alice, did not give their names during that visit. They did not mention their connection to previous visitors. And yet Mrs. Piper was able again to produce intimate family details. She mentioned a son who had died the previous year and named him. The names, James noted, came through slightly off, as if the sounds and details were had to pass through a dense wall and could not arrive intact. Their dead son had been named Herman. She called him Herrin. But even so she was often astonishingly, breathtakingly, unbelievably right. She knew that he had his wife had lost a rug, that they had put down a cat with ether, that his wife had received a letter from aunt, warning her against mediums. In her trance, Mrs. Piper was very sarcastic in her descriptions of the aunt. In their cattiness, though, the comments were accurate enough to make James laugh.

It wasn't that Mrs. Piper didn't get things wrong. She did. And she had no showy skills – she couldn't levitate furniture or cause ghostly visitations, as some mediums claimed. She just went into a trance and apparently let the voices of others come through. Even then, sometimes the voices only meandered through meaningless discussions. It

was the dead-on comments amid the trivia that were so often startling. On one evening, she told James that his son's spirit had been joined by the dead son of his wife's cousin, whose name was Robert. James went home and said to his wife, "Your cousin did lose a baby, didn't she? But Mrs. Piper was wrong about its sex, name and age." It then turned out that the medium had been correct in all those details and that "mine was the wrong impression."

The psychical research society had learned to be cautious about successful mediums. It hired detectives to shadow Mrs. Piper and make sure that she wasn't doing research to find such facts. They tested the validity of her trances – pricking her with needles, waiving ammonia under her nose, even burning her lips. She woke from one session with her lips covered with blisters. They sent people to visit her who insisted on anonymity and still demanded facts. James Hyslop went to her house in one of his black masked disguises, sat only behind her, and never said a word. He left with stories about his family in Ohio that he then spent weeks writing letters to check out. Almost everything, he confessed, was right. Richard Hodgson was sent over by the British Society for Psychical Research to debunk her and became a convert. Eventually, the British society paid her way to England so that they could fully isolate her (there they routinely read her mail and changed servants so that she would have no way of gathering information). It was the exactness of detail in her sittings that was so often startling.

In one of Hodgson's tests, he brought a grieving couple to visit her. They had lost their daughter, Katherine, six weeks earlier. They brought a few of her things with them, some toys, a silver medallion, a handful of buttons. The mother, briefly, clasped Mrs. Piper's hands. Shortly later, in a trance, Mrs. Piper began asking for "Dodo", which was

the little girl's nickname for her brother, George. The medium put her hands to her throat. "No sore throat anymore." The child had suffered from a high fever and a blisteringly painful sore throat. "She calls herself Kakie," the medium said, which was indeed the child's nickname. She asked about her toy horse, her younger sister, and for her favorite song. "Papa, she said, "want to go ride horsey." She pleaded for this all through her illness, the mother said. The soft little voice coming from Mrs. Piper begged for Dinah (the child's rag doll) and for her sister Bagie (a nickname for her sister Margaret.) Both parents were in tears by the end of the sitting. Hodgson said that one of the aspects of Mrs. Piper's trances, which were so convincing to him, was that she only repeated things that the dead person might actually have known. Her rendering of the child had not a trace of adult knowledge to it.

"I should be willing now to stake as much money on Mrs. Piper's honesty as on that of anyone I know, and am quite satisfied to leave my reputation for wisdom or folly, so far as human nature is concerned, to stand or fall by this declaration," James wrote to Frederick Myers. They began to hunt for other mediums with the same willingness to be studied and the same mysterious hints of undeniable power. And slowly they began to find them. They were "scandalously rare", James said. But in a few of the other self-proclaimed psychics, the scientists found the same suggestion of the unknown. Two of the notable others were Anna Verrall and Rosalie Thompson. Mrs. Thompson wrote down her messages rather than talking them out and on those scribbled pages were the kind of details that again startled the researchers. In one sitting – reminiscent of a Leonora Piper experience – she described in detail the repeated, and finally successful, suicide attempts of a young Dutch friend of a visiting scientist. Scribbled on the page

were notes about the knife he had used to cut his throat and the gathering despair that had filled his last days. She had it all right, down to the placement of the slashes on the dead boy's skin.

All the black crows

In fact, the evidence gathered by James and Lodge and the Sidgwicks and Hodgson and their colleagues might have compelled a wider following if not for the fact that for every credible report – every Nellie Titus and Leonora Piper – scientists could document a dozen psychical cranks and con artists.

There was Daniel Douglas Home, who used to paint his hands with phosphorescent oil so that they suddenly began to glow, and who once persuaded an elderly woman that her dead husband wanted Home to have all her money. There were the Fox sisters, of upstate New York, who refined a system of cracking their joints to simulate ghosts rapping on walls. The psychical researcher spent untold energy exposing fraudulent clairvoyants. And those reports outnumbered the believable ones. Truthfully, as a writer, I love the theater of this part of the story. As part of their research, psychologists began hiding under furniture and leaping out of closets in their efforts to detect psychical fraud. At what other time in psychology could you find a university professor, lying under a table, gripping the shoes of a medium? So-called psychics built devices that rattled windows, tipped furniture, pulled tabletops into midair. They strung fine wires that caused glowing hands to drift over the amazed visitors. They coated their own fingers in glowing phosphorescent paint. It was as if the simple act of simply trying to talk to the

dead wasn't enough. Some séances seemed almost pure entertainment, as if the dead were needed to perform circus tricks. In one memorable report to the Society for Psychical Research, the investigating psychologist wrote that he was forced to drop to the floor when an aggressive luminous hand began floating around the room, ripped off a lampshade, and threw it at his head.

Surely, there was never a more adventurous and entertaining period in psychology than this one. Psychologists spent their evenings ducking floating body parts. They attended séances and hid themselves under sofas and inside cabinets, leaping out to display the wires and switches and other tricks that caused body parts to waft through the air and tables to tilt as if grasped by an invisible being. They revealed the nature of ectoplasm (whipped egg white) and pale, passing spirits (women in their underwear) and the subtle signals that one psychic might pass to another. One pair of so-called mind readers admitted that they learned to signal each other by just rolling their eyes. If one was supposed to "know" the playing card the other held, the cardholder would upward to signal hearts, down for clubs.

In the 1890s, almost every psychology department in the country had an established psychical research professor. Within a decade, most abandoned the field or decided that their real mission is to expose fraud. The magician Harry Houdini was another early 20th century crusader against psychical fraud. He used to collect strings and wires and all the equipment used to cheat. Houdini too had begun simply by hoping to talk to his dead mother and been driven to skepticism by the widespread fakery he found. The British naturalist T.H. Huxley, a friend and supporter of Darwin, remarked sarcastically that the alleged powers of psychics were the best-ongoing argument against suicide. Why choose

to die, he asked, when apparently one would be called back to do parlor tricks for the living? “Better to live a crossing sweeper, than die and be made to talk twaddle by a ‘medium’ hired at a guinea a séance.”

So that the credible results – the quiet conversations, the small, elegant details – were drowned out by the cacophony of cheaters. Outraged, the psychical researchers became obsessed with clearing the field of fakes. How could they do their work in the middle of this constant din of liars? They became ruthless in their impatience. They dismissed any medium that refused to be studied. Those who did were scrutinized had their furniture disassembled, their cupboards searched, their servants followed. One famous 19th century medium, Eusapia Paladino, who swung between demonstrations of real power and obnoxiously obvious fakery – stringing wires to curtains and cabinets with reckless abandon - later said that she couldn’t resist cheating when the psychologists were visiting – they almost seemed to demand it. They would surround her, holding down her hands, peering at her feet. Who wouldn’t try to oblige them with a little fraud? Paladino gave the SPR real trouble. She cheated and yet she also produced inexplicable results, without a wire or phosphorescent hand in sight. With her, James wrote, “there is always the unexplained residuum.”

This carnival-like background makes it all the more remarkable that the psychical researchers persevered at all. They were a stubborn group. And they thought the goal itself – communication with the spirit world – was worth the failures. It was harder than they thought, more frustrating than they had imagined, more stressful.

Richard Hodgson, the athlete, dropped dead of a heart attack while playing handball. The year was 1905 and he was 50 years old. Perhaps, James and his friends, thought, this

might be their best opportunity for a clear channel to the dead. They tried to contact him through Mrs. Piper. But they received only hints of the man they remembered. Flickers of knowledge and sputters and starts but something short of the whole man. James believed that there had been contact with Hodgson – or a spirit version of him – but the interactions felt vexingly insubstantial. It wasn't quite enough to be solid and tangible proof; it wasn't the best of Mrs. Piper's sittings. But then her gifts seemed less potent over time, as if whatever abilities she had were diminishing with age. And perhaps, the researchers thought, none of us can keep these connections open forever. That we are allowed glimpses only, just enough to tantalize, never enough to prove. James wrote: "I confess that at times I have been tempted to believe that the Creator has eternally intended this department of nature to remain baffling, to prompt our curiosities and hopes and suspicions all in equal measure, so that, although ghosts and raps and messages from spirits are always seeming to exist and can never be fully explained away."

The other world

And that's the point of *The Ghost Hunters*. This is partly an exploration of that which could not be explained away, of the white crows. Of Leonora Piper and of Nellie Titus and Helene Smith, a French medium who converted a host of skeptics, and the three renowned British psychics, of Mrs. Verrall and Mrs. Leonard and Mrs. Thompson. The

research involving those women is also a tale of an unexpected kind of scientific heroism. It took both courage and conviction for these men to pursue their research. They were loathed by fraudulent psychics and serious scientists alike. They were publicly ridiculed. They caused some of their own problems. They quarreled over the evidence. The American chapter went bankrupt in its enthusiasms. They were occasionally tricked themselves. They did not find the clear, inarguable proof that they had hoped to find. They did not explode that bomb of evidence. There was no all-convincing detonation, as James had hoped.

Yet they also succeeded. They surely underestimated themselves what they had accomplished. Against considerable odds they managed to preserve a sense of possibility. Their work still stands as a warning against scientific arrogance. James' words still stand as one of the best arguments against assumption that we know all. He could write the following paragraph today and it would serve just as well as a caution against hubris: "Out of my experience, such as it is (and it is limited enough), one fixed conclusion dogmatically emerges, and that is this: that we with our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Conancicut and Newport hear each other's foghorns. But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom..." Let us never forget, he wrote, how much we don't know. He and his colleagues managed to keep alive an absolutely critical sense of mystery that allows us to accept that there may indeed be worlds that we cannot yet comprehend.

The story works because of that small, provocative collection of inexplicable results. Yes, I want to set this against the theatrical background of chicanery and spectacular fraud and scientific adventure. Yes, I want to tell some ghost stories. But at the heart of this book is a tantalizing question that yet endures: the possibility that these beleaguered researchers were really onto something. Does science – even 21st century science – explain everything that happens, eliminate all uncertainties, solve all of unknowns? And should it?

Perhaps we need the possibilities. Perhaps one of the most important tenets of being human, one that allows us to cope with the challenges of life, is that we leave the door open onto the unknown. Perhaps all of us – even those grounded in the observation-based realities of research – still need the occasional glimmer of magic in our existence. Perhaps hope depends on admitting that we cannot quite see the horizons of reality. Those leaps of faith underlie some of the most successful books, both fiction – this year's *The Lovely Bones*, in which author Alice Seybold suggests that the living only let go of the dead, when the dead can let go of the living. The possibility that we are watched over, that nothing is really a coincidence, forms the heart of the last summer's hit movie, *Signs*. Scientists too have hinted at this intersection of known and unknown. In Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, he concludes by suggesting that perhaps, if we can really understand the laws of physics, we will begin to understand the mind of God. Perhaps James was right and we should admit that life, at its best, is a thing of unsolved mysteries. Running through this story is the ongoing conflict between science and spirit, between a way of explaining the world that is grounded in the solidly seen and one that relies on faith in the partly seen. This long ago, almost forgotten quest illuminates these

boundaries, the way science attempts to deal with uncertainty. It certainly allows us to ask whether the limits of research should be considered the real boundaries of our world.

A brief, proposed outline:

Chapter One: The Woman on the Bridge

The story of Nellie Titus, Bertha Huse and her mysterious death and disappearance told in richer detail. I'd like to go up to this part of New Hampshire and recreate this story in more depth.

Chapter Two: William James in the Company of Ghosts

William James grew up in a family wholly open to the power of spirits. His father followed the cult teachings of Swedenborgianism, which taught that the material world is intimately linked to the spirit world. His famed novelist brother, Henry, wrote one of the most memorably haunted novels, *The Turn of the Screw*, and even helped William out with some of his psychical research. This chapter will tell the story of William James and how, in addition to being an eminent psychologist and an influential philosopher, he

became one of the most famous ghost hunters of the late 19th century. It will hint at, but not fully introduce, his colleagues.

Chapter Three: The Spirit World

Of course, for there had to be a growing sense of presence, of the tangible other world, for scientists like James to become engaged. This chapter will explore that “dust cloud” of ghostly occurrences that had been building up over the previous century, from haunted houses to mysterious psychics, creating enough momentum and interest that even science itself would find the possibilities irresistible.

Chapter Four: The Ghost Hunters

At the end of the 19th century, psychical research was surprisingly mainstream. Every large psychology department had a faculty member dedicated to psychical research. The early psychology journals are crammed with spirit reports. Yet, only a few of the scientists became persuaded that this was genuine science. This chapter sets out the formation of James and his colleagues into a determined group of ghost hunters, the founding of the British Society of Psychical Research and the American Society for Psychical Research, and their drive for credibility.

Chapter Five: The Slippery Slope

But how to be credible? This chapter will examine the tricky nature of sifting through psychic claims and sifting what seems credible and what must be discarded. The early years of the ghost-hunting group are all about learning how to do the work, how to separate the possible from the improbable. It was a time of raising the dead and then reburying most of them. But not all.

Chapter Six: Visits from the Dead

Still, the researchers insisted that they had to measure, quantify, the encounters between the living and the dead. This chapter will explore the work of Gurney and Sidgwick in evaluating those thousands of stories of people who suddenly were confronted by a face from the past, a voice of a loved once, a sense of urgency that later turned out to be justified. What was it that caused these “crisis apparitions” to appear without warning and to fade away?

Chapter Seven: The Luminous Hand

Meanwhile, the others in the group turned their energies to debunking frauds and fakes. This chapter follows the most unusual work ever done, I think, by trained psychologists as they exposed the theatrical tricks of the psychic con artists and tried to clear the field for the talented few. It has floating hands and ectoplasm bubbling out of medium's ears and levitating tables and challenges to the investigating scientists that will probably never come this way again. And the ghost hunters had to learn to navigate through this mess, with some honor intact.

Chapter Eight: Ghost Stories

The death of Edmund Gurney was a genuine setback for the group. They were a small band anyway, fighting to stay on task. They worked on anyway. And this time, they took on a more ambitious approach. With Nora Sidgwick leading, they determined on a scientific evaluation of ghost stories. And they managed, out of the chaos, to find some psychics worth pursuing.

Chapter Nine: The best medium in the world

William James, Richard Hodgson and James Hyslop focused testing and retesting psychics. . The best of these was Leonora Piper of Boston, whose story I've related earlier, and who will be the center of this chapter, a psychic surprising enough that James thought her work alone could be considered proof that they were on the right track.

Chapter Ten: The last White Crow

But in the end, he and his friends remained caught between hope and frustration. And yet— as James pointed out — perhaps frustration was part of the point. Perhaps mystery is part of the answer. And yet, even until his death, he believed that we would someday solve that mystery.

Chapter Eleven: The Borderlands

So what is the legacy of the woman on the bridge? The intellectual bequest of William James and his dogged, faithful group of ghost hunters? I think the story ends on a note of promise. It reminds us that science, at its best, always leaves the door open onto the unseen, unpredictable world of possibility.

My story, partly haunted

I am a long-time science writer and a professor of science journalism at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. I worked as a newspaper science writer for 20 years and won a Pulitzer in 1992 for writing about primate research. I have since published three books, *The Monkey Wars* (Oxford, 1994), *Sex on the Brain* (Viking, 1997) and *Love at Goon Park* (Perseus, October 2002). *Sex on the Brain* was a New York Times Notable Book and *Love at Goon Park* was named a Best Book of 2002 by Publisher's Weekly.

I am also co-editor of *A Field Guide for Science Writers* (Oxford, 1997) and have written about scientific research for publications including *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *Discover*, *Health*, *Psychology Today* and *Mother Jones*. I am president-elect of the National Association of Science Writers and serve on advisory boards for both the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the National Academy of Sciences.

My most recent book was also based in history of psychology so I can add to this a background in historical research. I have already located and begun working with some of the archives central to this story. I mention my professional profile not only to establish my credentials as an author but also to emphasize that I bring a strong and credible voice to the debate on psychical research. . I have been writing about the scientific process for most of my career and I have a great deal of respect for it. I also understand that science does not explain everything. And I believe that one always must leave room for possibility. But what makes my background so useful in this case, is that I can write about these issues without being dismissed. I can write a book that will engage readers across an unusually wide spectrum – not only those already interested in spiritualism, but historians, psychologists, philosophers. And I think that it will be widely read. This is, after all, a terrific story to tell across all kinds of dimensions.

Finally, I have a ghost story of my own to tell. This one actually might have turned up in Gurney's *Phantasms of the Living*. It involves my father-in-law, a small businessman, a retired fire chief, a conservative Norwegian-American, in other words, as pragmatic and unexcitable a personality as you could meet. The story begins on a night, more than a decade ago, and it concerns an event that never repeated itself. He woke up

in the dark, sometime past midnight, and sat straight up in bed. The motion was abrupt enough to wake his wife. “What is it?” she asked. “Bob’s outside,” he said, referring to a once-close cousin. They were both middle-aged now, they lived in different parts of California, but they’d played together as boys. “Do you hear him? I think he wants to come in.” And he was up, opening the door, listening in the quiet night. He heard the call again and went running to a window. Outside though, there was only the dark and the dry flutter of a bird in a nearby tree. Finally, they went back to sleep. And in the morning, when the phone rang early, it was his cousin’s wife. And Bob had shot himself in the middle of the night, after receiving a terminal cancer diagnosis.

He still wonders about that night. So do I. No answers but absolutely wonderful questions. It reminds me that the puzzle is still with us. It’s still an unfinished adventure. William James concluded that he and his friends had been too optimistic. They had thought they could solve one of life’s greatest mysteries in just a few years. By the end of his life, he thought it could take centuries of work. But even until his death, in 1910, James himself never abandoned the question. He studied, encouraged, supported, cajoled and defended. On his deathbed, he asked his brother, the famed novelist, Henry James, Jr., to watch for him in the months ahead: He had plans, it seemed, to haunt Henry’s dreams.

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