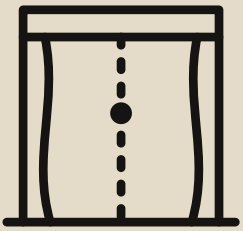
BOOK / 1891



CONFESSIONS OF A CABINET MEDIUM

Mrs. Lavinia Crewe

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Mrs. Lavinia Crewe, 1891

TO THE READER

I have been asked by several persons why I should write this book, when I might simply have stopped, and I have asked it of myself. The answer is that stopping is not enough. There are women still sitting in cabinets tonight in every town I worked in, and there are mothers going to them with their savings in their hands. If one of those mothers reads this first, the trouble of writing it is repaid.

I do not write to mock anybody's faith. I do not know what becomes of the dead. I know only what became of the money.

HOW I CAME TO IT

I was fourteen and my father was lately dead. My mother held a circle in our front parlour on Thursday evenings, as many did then, with the neighbours and a hymn and a table. Nothing happened for some weeks. One night, out of boredom and a wish to please her, I pressed my knee against the table leg and it moved, and my mother wept, and the woman from next door said that it was Father.

I meant to tell her after. I did not, because the next Thursday there were eleven people in the parlour instead of six, and they had brought cake. By the end of the year there was a collection plate. By the time I was twenty I was a professional, with a cabinet made by a joiner and a gentleman who arranged my engagements, and it would have taken a braver girl than I was to say that it began with a knee.

THE CABINET

The cabinet is a corner of the room closed off by a curtain. The medium sits inside it on a chair, and is tied to the chair by a member of the company, and the lights are lowered, and the company sings. In time the curtain stirs, and a hand appears, or a face, or a figure in white, and a voice speaks through a tin trumpet that floats in the air.

I will not set down how each thing was done, because some of it is dangerous and all of it is tedious. I will say three things. First, that there is no knot tied by an excited gentleman in a dim room which cannot be slipped by a woman who has practised for eleven years. Second, that a great deal of white muslin can be hidden in a very small place. Third, and most important, that the sitters do half the work. The darkness is very dark, and the singing is very loud, and a person who wishes with all their heart to see their son will see him in a curtain moving.

THE SITTERS

The newspapers think that mediums deceive fools. This is wrong. I deceived schoolmasters, magistrates, a surgeon and two clergymen, and many of them were cleverer than me. What they had in common was not stupidity but loss.

We knew more about them than they supposed. Mediums talk to one another, and a family that went from one circle to the next took its history with it. A servant might be paid for news of a household. The rest was done by attention. A woman will tell you, without knowing she has done it, whether her lost one was a husband or a child, old or young, taken quickly or slowly. You say something general and watch her face, and her face says the rest, and then you give it back to her and she marvels that you knew.

I remember a carter who came every week for a year to hear from his little girl. He never asked her anything. He only wanted to hear her say that she

was not cold. Each week I said it for her in a small voice through the trumpet, and each week he thanked me and put a shilling on the plate, and I have thought about that shilling more than about all the guineas of the surgeon.

HOW I WAS CAUGHT

In the winter of 1888 a young man at a sitting in a mill town took hold of the spirit form as it passed him and would not let go. The gas was turned up. I was standing in my stockings with a sheet over my arm and a false beard, for the spirit that night was meant to be a sea captain.

I expected to be ruined. I was not. The circle turned on the young man. They said that he had broken the conditions, and that by seizing the medium while the spirit was using her he had very nearly killed me, and that what he held in his hands was not me at all but a likeness the spirits had put there to punish him. Two of the ladies helped me back into my chair. The following week the room was fuller than ever.

It was then, I think, that I began to be afraid, not of being found out, but of not being found out. I saw that nothing I could do would undeceive them. It took me two more years to stop.

WHAT I CANNOT EXPLAIN

I must set down one more thing, or this account would itself be a fraud.

In the autumn of 1889, at a private sitting, a woman I had never met asked for her brother. I began as usual. Before I had properly begun, the trumpet, which was lying on the table and which nobody was touching, rang once, as if it had been struck with a fingernail. The woman said, "That is how he used to call me in." I had done nothing. I have gone over it a thousand times. There may have been an accomplice in the house who was not mine. There

may have been a draught, or a cart in the street, or a coincidence. I do not know.

I do not offer it as proof of anything. I offer it because it is true, and because after eleven years of making the dead speak I should like to record the one time something answered that was not me.

A WORD TO THE BEREAVED

If you have lost someone and are thinking of going to a medium, I ask only this. Sit at home first, on your own, at the hour they used to come in, and say aloud what you would say to them. Do not wait for an answer. If an answer comes, you have lost nothing. If it does not, you have said it, and that is the part that matters, and it was never anything that you needed to pay me for.

ABOUT THIS TEXT

TITLE	Confessions of a Cabinet Medium, Written by Herself, with a Word to the Bereaved
AUTHOR	Mrs. Lavinia Crewe
DATE	1891
TYPE	Book
PUBLISHER	Printed for the author and sold by subscription
EXTENT	64 pages, octavo, in printed paper wrappers
LANGUAGE	English
SOURCE	Transcribed from the archive's copy, which lacks its rear wrapper. The seven chapters are given complete except for one passage, noted in the introduction. The author's spelling and punctuation are kept.

The exposure of fraudulent mediums was a minor industry of the late nineteenth century. Magicians did it on stage, newspapers did it in print, and a steady trickle of former mediums did it in short books with titles like this one. Most are lurid and many are themselves fraudulent: written for money by people who had never sat in a circle, or by mediums who returned to the trade a year later.

This one is different, and it is the reason the archive keeps a copy. Lavinia Crewe practiced as a cabinet medium in the north of England for eleven years, retired in 1890, and published her account by subscription the following year. She is precise about the methods without being gleeful, and she is far more interested in her sitters than in herself. She does not mock them. She is, if anything, angry on their behalf, and angriest at the person she used to be.

The final chapter makes the book more than an exposure. Having explained every effect she produced, Crewe describes one evening that she did not produce and cannot explain, and declines to draw a conclusion from it. It is a rare thing in this literature: a debunking that ends in honest uncertainty.

Readers who want the wider history should consult How to Read a Fringe Religious Movement, whose remarks on disconfirmation apply closely to Crewe's account of what happened when she was caught. Her methods are described here in general terms only, and the reading copy omits a passage on the preparation of luminous paint, which was poisonous.

COLOPHON

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