

A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION OF THE PLATFORM
CLAIRVOYANTE MRS HELEN HUGHES

BY C. V. C. HERBERT

MRS Helen Hughes has established a considerable reputation as a platform clairvoyante at public meetings, and she has also a large practice of private Sittings. In her platform work she is especially distinguished by giving a large number of names, both Christian names and surnames, a considerable proportion of which are accepted as veridical by the recipients of the messages. This frequent occurrence of names and the general precision of her messages make investigation of her powers comparatively easy, and do a good deal to offset the general difficulties which are always involved in the study of platform mediums. It is probably true to say that investigation of Mrs Helen Hughes is likely to be more worth while than that of any other platform clairvoyante who practises at the present time.

It was therefore felt that the extremely inadequate data relating to Mrs Hughes, which were all that the Society's files contained—one short note by an investigator who had attended one of her public meetings—ought to be very considerably augmented, and that every opportunity should be taken of studying her remarkable powers, and of submitting her claims to supernormal cognition to a critical analysis.

The procedure at a usual platform demonstration is as follows:—The meeting, to which members of the public are admitted free of charge, begins with a speech by the Chairman, which serves to introduce the subject in general and Mrs Hughes in particular to the audience, and gives the medium time to settle down into a state of receptiveness, or, as some believe, of semi-trance. The speech lasts half an hour or so, and as soon as it is over Mrs Hughes begins her clairvoyant "readings" without further preliminaries. She does not appear to be in an abnormal state: her voice is her usual voice, and any condition of trance must be an extremely light one. It is, however, recorded that at a recent meeting held last year, Mrs Hughes was seriously affected by a disturbance which was made by a member of the audience, who was seized with an hysterical attack in the middle of the meeting. Mrs Hughes was unable to continue her performance, and burns or bruises were afterwards found on her person, caused, it is said, by the sudden shock of the interruption.

The messages are given in two forms. In one, Mrs Hughes addresses the audience at large and says, for example, "Is there anyone

here called Wilson? ”, or “ Is there anybody who knew a Doris Smith ? ” If a response is obtained, further information is then given. In the second class of message, a specific person is *first* selected. The medium says, “ I want to come here—*that* lady ” (pointing at a member of the audience). When the person’s attention has thus been secured, the message, generally containing names, is delivered. If the recipient disclaims the message, it is sometimes found that it applies accurately to the person sitting on her right or left hand, or in the row behind or in front. In nearly every case somebody is found who is understood to accept the message, at any rate in part. Sometimes Mrs Hughes ends by saying, “ Do I know you ? ” or “ could I have known that normally ? ” and the recipient generally says, “ No ”.

Some of the messages do not prove to be acceptable to anyone, but the general impression obtained by a member of the audience is that by far the largest proportion are more or less successes. Mrs Hughes speaks as though her information was obtained by a combination of clairvoyant and clairaudient perception. She “ sees ” figures “ building up ” near the various members of the audience concerned, and she also “ hears ” messages apparently from an unseen figure standing beside her—she sometimes half turns as though to catch a whispered conversation. The messages are given very quickly with considerable precision. After some twenty messages have been delivered, Mrs Hughes complains that the “ power ” is running low, and the proceedings come to an end.

At the demonstrations given by the London Spiritualist Alliance, which body has a monopoly of Mrs Hughes’ services, the arrangements are the same, except that the audience is of course much smaller than at the meetings held in a public hall.

There can be no question that the vast majority of the messages given at these performances are more or less correct. To what is this correctness due? To chance, to normally acquired knowledge, to supernatural cognition, or to information imparted to Mrs Hughes by discarnate spirits? These alternatives can easily be reduced to two, since chance is clearly not a feasible explanation for such consistent successes, and we have no means of differentiating with any degree of certainty between supernormal cognition obtained through incarnate intelligences and similar information dictated by spirits. Our problem, then, is the following: does Mrs Helen Hughes get her material normally or supernormally? This question can only be answered by studying exact records of what was said by the medium, and by obtaining critical statements from the recipients of the messages. Such an inquiry, so easy at an ordinary

Sitting, is a formidable task when large numbers of people, many of whom are members of the public whose names are unknown, are involved. There is, however, one consolation. By far the most fruitful source of leakage at an ordinary Sitting—the giving away by the sitter of vital information in response to “fishing” on the part of the medium—cannot here be operative to any appreciable extent. The recipients of messages scarcely speak at all. It is clearly impossible that Mrs Hughes could get her material by normal means from the recipients during the meetings. Her information, if normally acquired, must have been obtained beforehand.

As stated above, Mrs Hughes gives a large number of private Sittings in addition to her platform work. At these Sittings, no doubt, much valuable information must be disclosed by the sitters. Even without any conscious “fishing” on the part of Mrs Hughes, it is certain that inexperienced and uncritical sitters will infallibly tell her a great deal about their private affairs, much of which they will not afterwards remember that they have disclosed. If Mrs Hughes is able to remember this material and to associate it with the sitter’s appearance, then, if the sitter ever turns up at a platform meeting, this information could be given back. Many people have objected that such a process would necessitate a feat of memory on the part of Mrs Helen Hughes which, in view of the large number of private Sittings which she gives, is altogether impossible. What evidence have we that material brought up at a private Sitting is ever used again after an interval at a platform demonstration? There is, of course, the difficulty that even if, say, a veridical Aunt Jane, mentioned at a private Sitting, again put in an appearance long afterwards at a public meeting, that would be no proof that the second emergence was based on a memory of the first. It might be the real Aunt Jane who had communicated on each occasion, or if the first had been obtained by supernormal cognition from the sitter’s unconscious, the second might represent a similar but unrelated supernormal cognition. It would be just as though the two Aunt Jane communications had been obtained through different mediums.

But by a great piece of good fortune we have a well recorded incident in which memory, normal or abnormal, of a private Sitting seems to be the only *possible* explanation of the facts.¹

It is clear that, in evaluating Mrs Hughes’ platform work, we cannot take into consideration messages given to persons who have previously had private Sittings with the medium, unless indeed we have before us a full shorthand record of the private Sittings con-

¹ See page 210.

cerned and are thus able to tell exactly what information was disclosed by the sitter.

The first attempt by the Society to deal critically with one of Mrs Hughes' platform demonstrations was made in connection with a public meeting held at the Caxton Hall on October 24, 1938. It was arranged that a full shorthand note should be taken, and a number of members of the Society attended the meeting and distributed themselves about the hall. These members were instructed to note carefully the people in their vicinity who were given messages, and, after the meeting was over, to engage some of them in conversation and to find out if possible—(1) if they had had previous private Sittings with Mrs Hughes, (2) if they had ever before attended public meetings, and (3) if their friends or relations were known to Mrs Hughes or had had private Sittings.

This last point is of great importance as was shown at a previous attempt of the same kind which was made some time ago by Mrs Goldney. Mrs Goldney approached a member of the audience at a public meeting who had received a remarkable message. This gentleman declared that he had never had a private Sitting with Mrs Hughes, nor had he previously attended a platform demonstration. It seemed as though a very striking instance of supernormal cognition had taken place, as the message was clearly not to be explained by chance, when a lady who had been sitting near the recipient entered the conversation and explained that *she* had recently attended a private Sitting with Mrs Hughes at which her friend had been mentioned (she could not remember whether it was Mrs Hughes or herself who had first introduced the topic of this friend, nor could she see that this had any bearing on the matter). What Mrs Hughes *had* said was that she must be sure to bring the friend to the platform demonstration, which she accordingly did.

The members of the Society who attended the meeting at the Caxton Hall were able to interrogate five out of the eighteen persons who received messages. All five had previously been in contact with Mrs Helen Hughes.

It had been announced by the Chairman that any recipient of a message was invited to leave his name and address with the Secretary of the London Spiritualist Alliance, under whose auspices the meeting was held, so that further particulars could be obtained. The Alliance very kindly consented to communicate to the Society any information thus obtained, and also the answers to a questionnaire embodying the three points mentioned above, which was sent out to those who left their addresses. The questionnaire asked :

1. Have you before attended a public meeting with Mrs Helen Hughes and received a description from her ? If so, with what results ?
2. Have you ever had a private Sitting with Mrs Hughes ?
3. Have you any friends or relations who have sat with Mrs Hughes ?

The London Spiritualist Alliance received and communicated to the Society replies from eight recipients, three of whom had already been interrogated by our members after the meeting. In all, therefore, particulars were forthcoming from ten of the eighteen persons who were given messages. Of these ten, five had had private Sittings with Mrs Hughes, one was personally known to her, and one had received the same message at two previous platform meetings with this medium. The remaining three are therefore all whose messages we can profitably study in connection with our problem.

The first whom we will consider is a gentleman who had not previously sat with Mrs Hughes, though some of his friends had had Sittings with her. The message is recorded in the shorthand note as follows :

MRS HUGHES : " Sir, have you just come or have you ever lived in the Lake District ? "

RECIPIENT : " Yes ".

MRS HUGHES : " Just sitting in the seat against you is a lady who belongs to you. She says, ' Tell him I am here too, but you would almost think Elizabeth was comparing the Lake District to London. Tell him to try again. Get on with your development.' I have to tell you from Dr Hawke to go on, and not turn back. He says, ' He is right this time ' ".

The recipient writes as follows :

" She was correct in thinking I came from the Lake District. I cannot place ' Elizabeth ', but my recollection of that remark was that I was comparing London to the Lake District, and was advised to remain where I am, which is to me quite an evidential remark. I feel sure she said ' Dr Hall ', not ' Dr Hawke ', and that he advised my going on ' sitting for development '. This makes sense, as Dr Hall is a near neighbour, who is interested in these subjects, and sometimes discusses them with me. He tells me he knows Mrs Hughes, having ' sat ' with her in Edinburgh. . . . I know no Dr Hawke."

One of the members of the Society who took longhand notes gives the salient features of the message as " Lake District, Elizabeth, Dr. Hall." This supports the recipient's view that it was Hall and not Hawke that Mrs Hughes said.

There was here the obvious possibility that normal leakage might have taken place through Dr Hall, who knew Mrs Hughes and had sat with her in Edinburgh. Through the kindness of Miss Phillimore, the secretary of the London Spiritualist Alliance, I was given permission to write to the recipient in order to obtain more evidence on this point. He answered as follows :

“ Thank you for your letter about Mrs Helen Hughes, which I was only waiting to answer till I heard from Dr Hall.

He has now given me a *definite denial* of ever mentioning my name to her—as I knew he would. He is not my doctor, and I do not know him intimately, but occasionally I have been able to lend him books on these subjects, of which I have a great many.”

How, then, was Mrs Hughes able to associate this recipient with the Lake District, and to connect him with Dr Hall? Chance coincidence is obviously out of the question. Out of a large audience it is unthinkable that Mrs Hughes could select someone at random and could by luck correctly place him as connected with the Lake District, to say nothing of Dr. Hall. The only normal explanation would seem to be that some other friend of the recipient had in a sitting with Mrs Hughes conveyed the information that a person connected with the Lake District and with Dr Hall was likely to attend the meeting. But it must be noted that the information would have to be sufficiently detailed to enable Mrs Hughes to *recognise* the recipient, whom she had never seen, and to identify him from out of a large audience in a public hall. This seems to be highly unlikely.

In our next case the recipient was not selected by Mrs Hughes, but responded to a question addressed to the audience at large. The recipient had had no previous connection with Mrs Hughes, but she has been a spiritualist for the last fifty years, so there is certainly a possibility that she may have been recognised. The shorthand report is as follows :

MRS HUGHES : “ There is an old gentleman here named Levi. Anyone know him ? ”

RECIPIENT : “ I know Levi ”.

MRS HUGHES : “ There is something strange for him, but he is standing with you. He says, ‘ Levi is here ’, and someone called John too. Have you been suffering lately ? Do you know what Levi says ? Levi says, ‘ Tell Nellie we have helped to pull her round ’. You have been suffering all over your body. Levi says ‘ Tell Nellie she is all right in our hands, and we will not fail her ’. Do you belong to Bournemouth ? ”

RECIPIENT : “ I know Bournemouth ”.

MRS HUGHES : " There is a lady standing with you who belongs to Bournemouth "

RECIPIENT : " Yes "

MRS HUGHES : " Dr Gilbert and Mrs Meddleson "

RECIPIENT : " Yes "

MRS HUGHES : " Did she spend her holidays with you ? "

RECIPIENT : " Often "

MRS HUGHES : " She spends her holidays now over here which is much better. Now I hate to say this to you. . . . Have you twins ? "

RECIPIENT : " No "

(Another member of the audience said, " She is a twin ")

MRS HUGHES : " Thank you. Did you know the Wolff family ? "

RECIPIENT : " Yes, very well indeed "

MRS HUGHES : " I have to say, ' Tell her we want to let her know we can speak to her ! Don't worry about your health will you ? '

RECIPIENT : " No, I won't, thank you "

The recipient's Christian name is Nellie. She disclaims " John ", and " Dr Gilbert ", but knows Levi, Mrs Mendelssohn (given as " Meddleson ") and the Wolff family. As regards the latter, she notes : " The lady next to me . . . is one of twins . . . her father's name was Wolf." This lady was herself the recipient of a message. She is well known to Mrs Hughes and had had private Sittings. This naturally tends to invalidate the allusions to twins and to the Wolff family, as Mrs Hughes may well have known these facts about the lady sitting next to the recipient. There is also the possibility that Mrs Hughes may have identified the recipient as a friend of this lady whom she knew.

The third case is certainly the best, the gentleman in question never having attended a spiritualistic meeting before, and being quite unconnected with Mrs Hughes. He says that some of his relations had been interested in the spiritualist movement, but that none knew Mrs Hughes.

The message was as follows :

MRS HUGHES : " Sir, did you know anyone called Bromwell ? Mr and Mrs Bromwell have come to your side . . . or is it Bramwell ? Not a relation, but knew you as a boy. They say, ' Ask him if he knew a policeman '. He says, ' Will you tell him Jack is here ', and as Jack comes along, I can just see him as if he has taken a hat from his head and placed it on your knee. He says, ' I want you to know we have a happy home here and one day you will enter therein '. I am touching a soul who was very doubtful, wondering if life went on or not. Jack, Renie, Annie and Sam want you to know it is all true. Do you know Douglas ? Or, you are Douglas ? Renie says, ' Don't forget I am helping my boy and helping you ' "

The recipient's annotations are as follows :

" I cannot recall the name of Bromwell, but knew several Bromleys who have passed over. I also had a nephew who served in the police force. Rene was my late wife, Jack our dear doggie who survived her by six months. Sam was an old friend, and Annie, although alive, I believe, his wife. Regret that I cannot fix Douglas. The boy mentioned is my son."

In answer to further inquiries the recipient says that Annie, the wife of Sam, is still living, but that this Annie's mother, who was also called Annie, and was the recipient's Aunt, is dead, so it may be that it was she who was intended.

There are, of course, several discrepancies. If the Jack mentioned was intended for the dog, he can hardly have been seen to " (take) a hat from his head and (place) it on (the recipient's) knee." And he can certainly not have made the speech, " I want you to know we have a happy home here and that one day you will enter therein ", of which Jack seems to have been the author. Nor is " Ask him if he knew a policeman " a very direct way of " getting over " that the recipient's nephew had served in the police force. But for all that there are some striking things in the message. Renie is not a common name, and although Sam and Annie are very usual, they are by no means certain hits.

Bromwell or Bramwell for Bromley is not so good, and Douglas is a misfire. In all we have Renie, Sam, Annie, Bromwell or Bramwell, Jack and Douglas ; six names, of which Renie, Sam and Annie are correct, Bromwell is partly correct, Jack is significant but incorrect in the context, and Douglas is wrong. There is also the attribution of a son to Renie, which is correct. All this would certainly appear to be above chance expectation, and it is very difficult to see how under the circumstances there can have been any normal leakage.

Our examination of this meeting at the Caxton Hall shows that a large majority of the recipients of messages have had previous contact with Mrs Hughes—generally in the form of private sittings ; and that of the three cases examined, where no contact could be found, two certainly provide a *prima facie* case for supernormal cognition. It is impossible to say more ; but there can be no doubt that the investigation proves the desirability of further research into Mrs Hughes' platform work.

On the occasion of a private platform demonstration given by Mrs Hughes at the London Spiritualist Alliance on December 1st, 1938, the Alliance suggested to the Society that we might combine with

them to share the cost of taking a shorthand note, it being agreed that names and addresses should be taken of the recipients of messages, and a questionnaire sent out as before, the replies received to be communicated to the Society. We were naturally very glad to avail ourselves of this kind offer.

At this meeting 19 messages were given, and 14 recipients left their names and addresses. But of the 14 only eight replied to our enquiries. Three of these had had previous private Sittings, leaving us 5 cases for examination.

One of these is so slender that it is not necessary for me to quote it in detail. The name Harold was given which was significant for the recipient's deceased brother, but the recipient did not think at the time that the message was intended for him at all.

Our second example is also weak. Mrs Hughes said :

"Is there anyone who knows a young man who was killed by aeroplane?"

RECIPIENT: "Yes".

MRS HUGHES: "Eric. I see a beautiful picture of where he is, I wish I could show it to you—he has got a plane—Eric (or Ulrich) passed out under those conditions, but he is back to tell you he is still going on, and he says 'Tell her I am working hard with scientific researches'. Are you sitting for development at all?"

RECIPIENT: "Not now. I have been".

MRS HUGHES: "I am very sorry to hear you have given it up, because you are in touch with Eric and with many other souls, and I know you could do a lot of good if you would just give way".

RECIPIENT: "I have communicated with him".

MRS HUGHES: "You could have gone on further. Eric is very excited because he can come to you".

The name Eric is correct for a near relative of the recipient who was killed in an aeroplane accident. It must be noted that Mrs Hughes began by asking if there was anybody who knew a young man killed by aeroplane; but the name Eric was added after the recipient had replied. But there are obviously loopholes for normal leakage here.

The following case is rather better :

MRS HUGHES: "There is a gentleman standing at my side: does anyone know old Mr Jackson?"

RECIPIENT: "Yes".

MRS HUGHES: "He is rather an elderly gentleman and suffered very much with chest trouble, this is what he has shown. It was not altogether the chest, it was the heart, he has come along and says, will I tell you that both Mr and Mrs Jackson have come along

to see you, and especially did Mrs Jackson know you in your younger days. Just today in your home you would utter these words, ' If only those you loved and who belonged to you could come back to speak, you would be content and convinced.' I want you to be convinced that Mr and Mrs Jackson have come along to you tonight. Will you tell me, did you post a parcel for someone, if it was not for yourself, it has gone abroad? Do you know if old Jackson lived abroad? "

RECIPIENT: " No ".

MRS HUGHES: " He is showing me something of someone abroad, he even speaks of the house he lived in, and is saying, ' Tell her I have met Mary over here and she is not to give way in life '. He means you, Madam. There have been times when you have said these words, ' Is there anything left to live for? ' I have got to say ' Yes '. Mrs Jackson wants to reassure you, there is a lot to live for if you will only remember they are with you instead of being lost and gone from you for ever. Did you know an old lady who was burned, there is something wrong with her hand? I do not know whether it was in her late days, or when she was younger, but her hand was scalded. Is there anyone belonging to you named Lizzie in spirit, an Aunt? William is with her, would you know that, William? "

RECIPIENT: " I would ".

MRS HUGHES: " It is Lizzie who has brought him, and her arm was burned. Mr and Mrs Jackson ask me will I convey their grateful thanks to you, and be sure to look up to them when you are needing help ".

The recipient writes that she knew a Lizzie, not an Aunt, who had a brother called " Willie ", but that they had no connection with Mr and Mrs Jackson, who were the recipient's Aunt and Uncle. They lived in Ireland and she saw very little of them, but more in her younger days, as stated in the message. As to Mary, Mrs Jackson has a daughter of that name still living, but there may have been a deceased relation of the Jacksons called Mary. The recipient did not know many of the family which was large. She knew nothing about Lizzie's scalded hand. The recipient says, " I don't know anything about the parcel abroad—but I did make a similar remark about ' If only those you loved, etc.' "

Here the recipient, having claimed " Old Mr Jackson ", was given the additional information that she had known the Jacksons better in her young days, which was true; and it was also suggested that Mr Jackson lived abroad. To this the recipient said, " No "; but in fact the Jacksons lived in Ireland, so it was not far wrong. She was then given, as associated with the Jacksons, a Lizzie who was said to be her Aunt and who was with William. The recipient had known a

Lizzie who had a brother called Willie, but she was not her aunt and had no connection with the Jacksons, whereas Mrs Jackson *was* the recipient's aunt. As the names Lizzie and Willie are far from uncommon, it is not too much to suggest that chance might be responsible for the partial successes which Mrs Hughes scored in this message.

The next recipient had attended a public meeting with Mrs Hughes, but had not received a message before. Apart from this there was no connection. Mrs Hughes said: "Are you carrying something, either a cross or something in your bag that is gold?"

The recipient had in her bag a silver cross which had belonged to her deceased brother. She had brought it on purpose in the hope of getting a message. The name Alec was given correctly for the communicator, and also the name Helena as for the recipient herself. This is striking as even if the recipient had taken the cross out of her bag during the meeting, and Mrs Hughes had seen it, that would not explain the correctness of the names.

The last case is the most evidential so far as names are concerned. Mrs Hughes mentioned Annie, Mrs Villma or Gilma, Katey Smith, Mrs Smith, Daisy, Mr French and Mrs French. The recipient says that Annie, Katey Smith, and Daisy are her deceased sisters. Mrs Smith is her mother. She knows no one called Villma or Gilma, but remembered afterwards that she had known a Dr French. (French was mentioned as being a Doctor or a Dentist).

Here again we have at least one message which provides a *prima facie* case for supernormal cognition. It is hoped that by repeating our procedure at future demonstrations, something more positive may be forthcoming, and we have therefore arranged with the London Spiritualist Alliance that a shorthand note shall be taken at both of two demonstrations which they are holding in February. The ideal arrangement, of course, would be to have a special meeting at which the entire audience was made up of people who had had no previous contact with Mrs Hughes. But owing to the great demand for Mrs Hughes' services, this is by no means easy to arrange. In the meantime, it does not seem that we can do better than to continue to collect evidence in the way that I have described.

The thanks of the Society are due to Miss Phillimore and the London Spiritualist Alliance for their kind co-operation; to those members of the Society who lent their services on the occasion of the meeting at the Caxton Hall, and especially to Mrs K. M. Goldney; and to Lord Charles Hope, who generously paid the costs of the shorthand writers.