

HARRY PRICE AND 'ROSALIE'

by R. G. MEDHURST

OF all the strange phenomena reported by parapsychologists, that of 'full-form materialization' is perhaps the most difficult for the non-converted to take seriously. Both Crookes's 'Katie King' and Richet's 'Bien Boa' attracted their share of ridicule. The physiological difficulty that a structure as complex as a living body, carrying in itself the minutely detailed record of its remote and recent history, should be created and destroyed almost at will in the séance room has daunted more than one otherwise sympathetic man of science.

Harry Price's story of 'Rosalie', which is the principal subject of Mr Cohen's book¹, is, taken at its face value, almost unique among such cases, insofar as Price had a degree of control over the sitters and the conduct of the sitting hardly ever permitted to the earlier investigators of phenomena of this kind. The story was first told by Price in his *Fifty Years of Psychological Research* (1939), and is reproduced in full in Dr Paul Tabori's *Harry Price: The Biography of a Ghost Hunter*. Price presents it as a 'verbatim and uncorrected' record, written on the night of the séance it describes.

In his account, he says that on the morning of Wednesday, 8th December, 1937, he was rung up by a lady who told him that every Wednesday evening she and some friends held a family séance at her house, during which a little girl spirit known as Rosalie *always* materialized. Price was invited to attend, provided that he promised not to reveal the identity of any of the sitters, or the locality where the séance was held. He 'was not to seek a scientific enquiry, as the mother of "Rosalie", who attended each sitting, was terrified that her girl might be frightened away'. Price was told that 'these Wednesday meetings were in the nature of a sacred communion with the spirit of her daughter, and would be maintained as such'. However, he was assured that before the seance he would have complete freedom to search premises and sitters and to introduce any control measures that he wished.

The following passage in Price's report is important, as will appear later:

'On Monday, December 13, I wrote to Mrs X, saying that I would accept her invitation and agree to all the conditions. As I happened to

¹ PRICE AND HIS SPIRIT CHILD 'ROSALIE'. By David Cohen. Foreword by R. S. Lambert. Regency Press, London, 1965. 151 pp. 18s.

have lunch with Mr R. S. Lambert, then editor of *The Listener*, on the day that she telephoned me, I asked her whether she would permit him to accompany me as a sort of witness of anything striking that might occur. I told her that I would personally guarantee that he would fulfil the conditions that I had accepted, and that he had said as much at lunch on the day she rang me up. If the idea of a witness was acceptable, I asked her to telephone or telegraph her consent on receipt of letter, in order that Mr Lambert could make the necessary arrangements. This confirmatory message was not forthcoming, so on Wednesday, December 15, I journeyed alone to the London suburb—to the most amazing seance that even I have experienced.'

Price, as he says, 'arrived at M— just after seven o'clock and made my way to Mrs X's residence'. The external appearance of the house, 'a typical, largish, mid-Victorian, double-fronted detached suburban house', is described by Price in rather minute detail, and he gives a plan of the room in which the séance was held. His precautions involved a very thorough search of the house, sealing of all doors and windows, and then an elaborate sealing of the séance room. The servants, a cook and a parlourmaid, were instructed that during the séance they were not to answer the door, and telephone callers were to be told to ring later (this latter detail is important as establishing that the house was one with a telephone).

The family is described as consisting of Mr and Mrs X and a daughter 'aged nearly seventeen'. 'Mr X is in business in the city, and both he and his wife are charming, with most affable personalities.' The sitters, besides these three, were Price, Madame Z, who was the mother of 'Rosalie', and a young bank-clerk aged about twenty-two, whom Price thought had more 'interest in the daughter of the house than in "Rosalie"'.

The séance commenced just after nine o'clock, and for most of the time was held in total darkness. The first hour was uneventful, though the mother of 'Rosalie' and the young girl sitter displayed considerable emotion. Just after ten o'clock, 'Rosalie' appeared. As Price describes it:

'Mrs X leant towards me and whispered, "Rosalie is here—don't speak!" At the same moment I, too, realised that there was something quite close to me. I neither heard nor saw anything, but the sensation was an olfactory one—I seemed to *smell* something that was not there previously. It was a *strange*, not unpleasant smell. Everyone was silent except for the rather distressing emotion of the mother. I sensed, rather than knew, that she was fondling her child. The next sound I heard was a sort of shuffling of feet on my left at the same moment as something slightly touched the back of my left hand, which was resting on my knee (we were not holding hands in any way). It felt soft and a

little warm. I did not attempt to feel what had touched me, but sat very still. Madame Z continued to whisper to the 'child' and her sobbing ceased somewhat.

'After a few minutes, Mrs X asked the mother whether I could touch the "materialization". Permission was given, and I stretched out my left arm and, to my amazement, it came in contact with, apparently, the nude figure of a little girl, aged about six years. I slowly passed my hand across her chest up to her chin and cheeks. Her chest felt warm, though (and this may have been imagination) not so warm as one would expect to find normal human flesh. I laid the back of my left hand on her right cheek; it felt soft and warm and I could distinctly hear her breathing. I then placed my hand on her chest again and could feel the respiratory movements.'

Later in his report Price described Rosalie's appearance, which he was allowed to view by the light of luminous plaques. He says: 'We beheld a beautiful child who would have graced any nursery in the land. Her features were classical and she looked older than her alleged years.'

Discussing his experience a year later, Price remarked:

'If "Rosalie" was genuine, then I have witnessed a "living" or semi-living full-form materialization. But the "Rosalie" experience was as unique as it was baffling, and that astounding "child" was "produced" under conditions which would not be accepted by one materializing medium in a thousand. Or, if accepted, nothing would happen. It is now more than twelve months since I wrote the "Rosalie" report in bed at my club, and several unsuccessful attempts have been made to induce the mother to consent to further experiments. But she is terrified at the thought that our arrangements might have the effect of driving her "daughter" away. But I am still persevering.'

In fact, the war came, and circumstances were such that all possibility of further sittings vanished.

The story of 'Rosalie' has continued to excite interest, right up to the present. In his biography of Price, Dr Tabori, after reviewing the evidence and the public reaction to Price's report, writes:

'I believe that Harry Price was speaking the truth and that he was both frightened and shaken by his experiences. If Mr X—whom Harry Price has described in a letter to his publisher as a well-known City businessman—realises that he owes a duty to psychical research and to Harry Price's memory, perhaps he will come forward after reading these lines. But unless he or some other sitter at that remarkable seance twelve years ago comes to our aid, the riddle of Rosalie must remain unsolved for ever.'

In 1958, Dr E. J. Dingwall and Mr Trevor Hall produced a book, *Four Modern Ghosts*, one chapter of which is concerned with discrediting the 'Rosalie' story. These two authors, together with Mrs K. M. Goldney, had previously produced a lengthy report purporting to show that Harry Price had systematically cheated at Borley Rectory. It is worthy of notice that in the preface to *Four Modern Ghosts* the authors, referring to their treatment of Price's 'Rosalie', say: 'It is hoped that in this case the reader may gather a few hints on how to appraise a story of this kind . . .'.

The Dingwall/Hall investigation was based on the assumption that the séance was held in Brockley, which assumption, they say, is 'proved positively' by correspondence (not quoted by them) to be found in the Harry Price Library at the University of London. What appears to be the correspondence in question is a letter from Mrs Clarice Richards to Price, published by Mr R. J. Hastings in the S.P.R. *Journal* for September 1964 and reproduced in Mr Cohen's book. While Brockley is mentioned, there is no shred of evidence to suggest that this is in connection with 'Rosalie'.

However, proceeding on this assumption, Dr Dingwall and Mr Hall made a laborious search of Brockley with the help of Ordnance survey maps, and decided that the only house even approaching in appearance and siting that described by Price was one in Wickham Road; they were easily able to show that for a number of reasons the location of the 'Rosalie' séances could not have been there.

Having decided on this basis that the house was 'imaginary' and the séance fictitious, Dingwall and Hall suggested that because, as they claimed, Price conspicuously lacked imagination he would have sited his invented house in a district with which he was familiar, and they supported this by reference to some séances attended by Price around the turn of the century in Wickham Road, Brockley, and the adjacent Manor Road (now Manor Avenue).

Mr Cohen's book retraces this ground, and recounts his own investigations, which unfortunately lead him no nearer to a solution of the puzzle. Mr Cohen has been at pains to reproduce in full all the evidence available to him, and on that account alone his book is of value. The style is far from professional, but he disarms criticism by remarking: 'My difficulty is not in acquiring the true facts but in being just an ordinary unqualified "working chap" getting these facts on paper. Like Price "I wish that there was somebody to teach me instead of having to educate myself".'

Mr Cohen makes no acknowledgment of Mr R. J. Hastings' prior publication and discussion of the significance of the letter by Mrs Clarice Richards (reproduced on p. 52 of *Price and his Spirit Child 'Rosalie'*), but this may be because his book was completed nearly two years ago. It is perhaps for the same reason that, though he complains (with much justification) of Mr Trevor Hall's book *The Spiritualists*, he makes only the barest reference to the long paper in the S.P.R. *Proceedings* by Mrs Goldney and myself, and without mentioning that this paper contains detailed refutation of the more blatant errors in Hall's book.

The correspondence reproduced by Mr Cohen adds nothing crucial to the 'Rosalie' story, though a letter from Mr Frank Whitaker, on p. 125, does make it clear that Price did a certain amount of editing of his original account before its publication in *Fifty Years of Psychical Research*, despite his description of it as 'verbatim and uncorrected'.

A very interesting foreword is contributed by Mr R. S. Lambert, in the course of which he is forthright about the 'fantastic accusations' of Dingwall and Hall, and takes them to task, very reasonably, for not having contacted him as a witness of Price's manner and conversation before and after the Rosalie séance.

I shall say no more about Mr Cohen's book. But there is more to be said of the 'Rosalie' affair. In view of the suggestion made by Dingwall and Hall that one might 'gather a few hints' from their handling of the case, it is astonishing that they contrived to miss everything of importance concerning 'Rosalie' to be found among the documents in the Harry Price Library. And so, I'm afraid, has Mr Cohen.

Some members of the S.P.R. have been looking into the matter in the last year, though I would not pretend that we have conducted our enquiry with the maximum efficiency. It may be of interest if I report in chronological sequence how we proceeded; in this way the reader may (who knows?) gather some hints on how *not* to conduct such an investigation!

The obvious starting point was to look through the files of Harry Price's correspondence around the period of the 'Rosalie' séance. Something of very considerable interest immediately came to light, to wit, the carbon copy of Price's letter to Mrs X, which is described in the passage from his report quoted earlier in this review. This letter (reproduced by kind permission of Dr Tabori, Harry Price's literary executor) reads as follows:

13th December 1937

Dear Madam,

I am taking advantage of your kind offer to attend a sitting at your house, and propose being with you on Wednesday next the 16th inst [actually the 15th], about 7 o'clock. If there is any difficulty about this I shall be grateful if you will kindly let me know immediately.

I am wondering whether you would be so kind as to allow Mr R. S. Lambert, the editor of *The Listener* (a journal which I know is read by you) to accompany me on Wednesday as a sort of witness. He would conform to all the conditions which you outlined to me last week, and I would personally vouch for him. If you can possibly see your way to grant my request, will you kindly telephone me or send me a telegram some time tomorrow (Tuesday) morning in order that I can communicate with Mr Lambert, who would then make the necessary arrangements?

Thanking you for your courtesy in this matter,

Yours faithfully,

There are minor discrepancies between the text of this letter and Price's account of its contents quoted earlier. In particular, he does not say in the letter that he agreed to all the conditions, neither does he expressly state that Mr Lambert had said that he would fulfil them. These, however, are minor slips to be expected when a letter is paraphrased from memory.

It is a peculiarity of many of the surviving carbon copies of Price's outgoing correspondence that they do not include the addressee's name and address. The present carbon copy, however, carries at the top a name typed directly onto the sheet, apparently with the same typewriter. The name is 'Mrs Mortimer'.

With such a clue, the location of the 'Rosalie' sitters seemed only a matter of time. In view of Mr Hastings' investigations, there appeared no reason to confine the search to any one London suburb. In his autobiographical *Search for Truth* Price appeared to narrow the field by describing the séance as happening in 'South London'. However, it did not seem wholly safe to take this at its face value.

As a first step, Mrs K. M. Goldney undertook the tedious task of copying out the names and addresses of all the Mortimers in the Greater London area who were listed as being on the telephone in 1937 (it will be recalled that one detail in Price's story required that there should be a telephone in the house). In the directory issued at the beginning of that year we found 108 Mortimer entries, and in a second directory issued in November there were eight more. The Post Office Guide was also scrutinized for Mortimers living in the London and suburban areas who had

resided in the same houses for some nine years, the period during which the 'Rosalie' sittings were said by Price to have taken place.

A fair number of the listed houses could be ruled out—some public houses, shops, offices, etc. During the next few months almost all the remaining houses were inspected from the outside, Miss M. R. Barrington covering the southern part of London, and I the northern. A few had disappeared due to enemy action or redevelopment; wherever the tone of the district seemed more or less right, the location of these houses, and their general style (i.e. frontage, and whether detached), were checked by inspection of contemporary ordnance survey maps. A small residue of houses in outlying and unlikely districts (such as St Albans and Hornchurch) remain uninspected, a few houses designated by name only in the directory could not be located, and a few of the non-extant houses could not be identified because the district was not covered by contemporary fifty inch numbered ordnance survey maps. For one reason or another it does not seem at all likely that any of the 'missing' houses could have complied with Price's description, and it did not seem worth carrying the search to whatever lengths would have been necessary to put the matter beyond all doubt.

To our disappointment, and no doubt to the reader's, none of the houses fitted Price's description at all closely, and hardly any even turned out to be substantial detached Victorian houses. Such as there were could almost all be eliminated for various reasons.

To our surprise, the only house that was even semi-plausible was one in Wickham Road, Brockley, where the search made by Dr Dingwall and Mr Hall had culminated, though for quite different reasons. This house, no. 21, is a detached, double-fronted Victorian house, but many details are wrong (the number of windows and steps are incorrect, it is not a corner house, etc.).

We found a similar, tantalizing situation as regards the family living in the house in 1937. Mr Mortimer, who now lives in a seaside town, could indeed have been described as a 'City businessman'. There was a Miss Mortimer—but in December 1937 she was only just fifteen, whereas the daughter of the family was said by Price to have been nearly 17. This Miss Mortimer, moreover, also has a sister two years younger. She says that if anything in the nature of a séance had taken place she and her sister would have been sent to bed and would not have known anything about it. Furthermore, while Mrs Mortimer has a long-standing interest in psychical matters, Mr Mortimer does not share this interest at all.

A curious circumstance is that in the early nineteen-twenties,

Mr and Mrs Mortimer lived in Manor Road which, like Wickham Road, was the location of the early sittings attended by Price which have already been mentioned.

At this point in the enquiry, Dr Alan Gauld discovered a further very relevant piece of evidence. This is a sentence in a letter from Mr S. J. de Lotbinière to Price, preserved in the Harry Price Library. The letter is dated 9th December, 1937, the day after Price received his telephone call from 'Mrs X', and the sentence reads:

'I look forward to hearing how the Brockley seance goes.'

Mr de Lotbinière is happily still living, but unhappily has no recollection of this matter. He writes: 'I was seeing quite a lot of Harry Price around that time and he was telling me of so many séances, past and present, that I cannot now distinguish between them.'

The discovery of Mr de Lotbinière's remark in 1937, taken with the carbon copy of Price's letter, seems to have left the case in more confusion than ever. Dr Dingwall and Mr Hall will perhaps suggest that Price himself made a carbon copy of a spurious letter and placed it in his files to deceive either his secretary, Miss Beenham (later Mrs English), or the investigator who found it twenty-seven years later. If the former were his intention, it might have been expected that he would have contrived to call Mrs English's attention to it, in which case her subsequent failure to recall this specific document would be surprising. She referred more generally to correspondence concerned with the 'Rosalie' case in testimony given to Dr Dingwall, Mr Hall and Mrs Goldney when they were conducting their enquiry into the events at Borley Rectory. After saying that she hears that there are allegations that the 'Rosalie' incident never occurred, she added: 'I feel certain, however, without remembering details, that there WAS correspondence, which I would have seen, between the family concerned and Mr Price, and that I typed letters from him to them.' It is a matter for surprise that Dr Dingwall and Mr Hall fail to mention this testimony.

If the carbon copy is accepted as genuine, it establishes that Price did in fact accept an invitation to a séance on Wednesday, 15th December, 1937; it then becomes plausible to postulate that the events related in his book took place more or less as he describes, since otherwise he would surely be running the appalling risk of the sitters coming forward to contradict his story. Such a conclusion is supported by the testimony both of Mrs Goldney and Mr Lambert as to his agitation after the séance, though Dr

Dingwall and Mr Hall try to discredit the first witness and ignore the second.

But how is one to account for our present failure to locate the correct Mrs Mortimer in Brockley? It is certainly odd that the Mortimer family we contacted lived successively in Manor Road and Wickham Road, both familiar to Price as scenes of early encounters with physical mediums, and the authors of *Four Modern Ghosts* may take this as confirmation of their suspicions. But juxtapositions of this kind do occur by chance, a fact curiously illustrated in the present case. The Miss Mortimer already mentioned is now married, and lives in a road adjacent to another Wickham Road and another Manor Road!

It may well be that Price, in fulfilment of his promise to conceal the identity of the sitters, omitted some vital step in his narrative. It is not inconceivable, for example, that he was met, and taken to a house other than the one he had anticipated. An obvious alternative possibility is that the telephone number of the house was exdirectory.

If one postulates the essential truth of Price's story one is not, of course, also postulating the authenticity of the phenomena. Mr R. S. Lambert, in his Introduction to Mr Cohen's book, seems to be expressing doubts on this point, as did Harry Price himself. In his *Search for Truth* Price writes:

'I was not—and still am not—entirely satisfied with the phenomenon, striking as it was. I was persuaded to publish the report against my inclination, as the "case" was incomplete and full investigation was unwelcome and difficult.'

Evidently Price envisaged the possibility that the manifestation reported by him was a clever fraud, and this conclusion may be considered to receive strong support from the continued silence of the sitters, which seems otherwise inexplicable.

REVIEWS

CROISSET THE CLAIRVOYANT. By Jack Harrison Pollack. W. H. Allen, London, 1965. 200 pp. 21s.

Let me start by stating that, through personal experience, I am convinced that Mr Gerard Croiset is a gifted ESP subject. But, on the other hand, I doubt whether this book, concerned with various aspects of the Croiset case, could help in convincing the unbiased investigator of the reality of ESP.

The evidence offered here is far from satisfactory; an exhaustive description of the experimental conditions is generally lacking (the