Adventures With a Mind Reader

The Ex-Assistant to a Fake Medium Here Relates Some Tragic and Comic Narrow Escapes Experienced on Tour With the Shrewd Mystics Who Feed "Answers From Heaven" to Questioners Crazy for a Glimpse of the Future

In my excitement I blurted out the truth . . . that my people were not of the mysterious East, but plain, everyday Americans.

Many women made fools of themselves over "the gifted one" . . . professed to find a "soul mate" in him, followed him from town to town.

"One of each," the mystic replied . . . and the next morning we were amazed to learn that the man's wife had really presented him with twins —a boy and a girl.

FOR a long time I traveled around the United States and Canada as the trusted assistant to a "mystic" who convinced thousands of persons that their pasts, presents and futures were an open book to him and that the performing of miracles was a simple matter to crystal gazers of his extraordinary occult powers.

I helped him in his stage act in vaudeville houses, at lectures and during many private readings. And I came to know that mind-reading—at least as he did it—is a snare and a delusion; pure, undiluted bunk.

I trembled as I took an active hand in fooling a gullible public with the answering of sealed questions, the summoning of spirit writing, the dispensing of phoney information about love affairs, business ventures, missing relatives and friends.

None of it was on the level, but the result of an organization of cagey assistants, confederates "planted" in theater audiences, trick devices available only to the profession, and an uncanny knowledge of mass psychology.

I will not elaborate on how these mystifying tricks were done, but relate some of the tragic and amusing adventures that happened to us in the course of our days on the road.

ONCE, when we were on our way to appear in a town in Oregon, the train stopped at a watering place and a man got on. He sat watching us for a minute or two and then said to the mystic: "I wonder if I could talk to you privately for a few moments."

At the next station, after an earnest and quiet conversation with "the gifted one," the stranger left the train, and I learned that he was a promoter of stocks in oil lands.

It seems that he had some prospects in the town we were headed for and that he had been inspired to seek our co-operation in his high-pressure sales campaign.

He would suggest to these prospects that they consult the mystic concerning the wisdom of investing in his venture by submitting sealed questions during our act, or merely concentrating on their queries: then the mystic would do his stuff.

The oil man gave us a list of his hoped-for customers in the town so that we knew their names and their financial status before we arrived.

During our stay in the community we assured many a half-sold investor in oil that "the investment he was contemplating seemed destined to succeed," and many deals were closed—to the profit of the promoter and of the mystic.

Later the promoter presented an elaborate scheme whereby we would work the same game in other places, but the mystic regarded the plan as too risky and declined to continue the arrangement.

Soon afterward we heard that the gentleman of the big idea had been jailed for his crooked methods, which we had once helped him put across.

This racket has, I believe, been worked often, the promoter of this or that scheme going ahead of the show and lining up prospects for the mind reader to finish selling during the course of his appearance in a string of cities and towns. By this unusual and unholy co-operation, the promoter rakes in the dollars and the medium gets his percentage with none of the victims being any the wiser.

I RECALL another adventure that gave me no amusement until we were safely out of the Canadian town where it happened. Gangsters had terrorized the place by their under-cover activities, and the courts had acquitted all the suspects brought to trial.

The mystic, always alert to ways of making his act sensational, announced that he would name the hard-boiled disturbers of the peace on Saturday night, at the end of his week's appearance in the town.

During the week he received several anonymous notes warning him that something unpleasant would happen to him if he went through with his plan. He boldly told his audiences of these threats and continued to announce that he would expose the guilty ones.

On Saturday night the theater was packed to the doors and we who were part of the medium's company were scared stiff. The report had been circulated that there might be shooting if the mystic talked too plainly, and uniformed officers and plainclothesmen were scattered about the theater.

Two members of our company quit, and when the curtain rose the rest of us went on in a cold sweat, for we knew the medium was going through with his nervy plan.

He did go through with it, giving his version of the criminal activities and naming the leader of the gang, one of the suspects the court had acquitted.

During the part of the act when members of the audience were coming up on the stage to have the mystic answer questions privately, two officers stood at the steps leading to the stage and kept their eyes peeled for tough characters bent on vengeance. But nothing happened.

That night when we went to dinner an officer went along with us and saw us safely to our hotel.

Late that night the telephone in the mystic's room rang and the clerk on the desk announced that Mr. ———, the gang leader the medium had accused, was calling. We pleaded with the mystic not to see him, but he told the clerk to "send him up."

To our surprise, he was a charming man. He nodded to us and turned to the mystic. "Hello," he said. "You have a lot of nerve, haven't you? May I sit down?"

Assured that he might, he lit a cigaret and went on talking. "I didn't send you any of those notes; some of the others who were afraid did. And you can't do me any harm because I was acquitted. I just dropped in to correct a few errors you made in your version of the gang troubles here."

He stayed and talked until it was time for us to take an early morning train, to which he drove us in his automobile. I never could decide whether he did that to protect us, or because he admired the mystic's courage.

THERE were many times that I thought our bag of tricks was going to be exposed, but I never was so embarrassed as at a party made up mostly of newspapermen. I was afraid to attend, but there was no way out of the engagement, so I went, vowing to engage in conversation with no one.

I was a target for a barrage of questions: How did I happen to get in the mind-reading racket? Was I psychic, gifted, occult, a student of the mysterious sciences of the east, particularly tuned, mentally, to the mystic?

Before I knew what was happening to me, I was in up to my neck and no match for these gentlemen of the press in their seemingly good-natured third degree.

In my excitement I blurted out the truth that my people were plain Americans and that one of my grandfathers was a minister of the gospel. To stall off other embarrassing questions I added: "but I turned Mohammedan and am studying Hindu philosophy." Then I smilingly added that I was in league with the Yogis and that they'd better beware.

They thought I was trying to be funny and laid off me to query the mystic and other members of the company. The day was saved so far as I was concerned.

Another uncomfortable moment in my career as a partner-in-hokum came during a special presentation of our mind-reading act in a large city in Idaho. The show was put on in the forenoon—a special morning performance designed to attract women.

But someone had neglected to call the theater staff, and no stagehands were present to handle the curtain and set the stage, so we found it would be impossible to use our ordinary methods of deception.

In trying to decide what to do about it, we took so much time that the audience got very impatient and we rang up the curtain determined to try a nervy scheme.

The written questions the women had put in a box as they came into the theater were sneaked backstage, and I hid behind the curtain to open the question and whisper them to the medium through the "peep hole" while he "concentrated" and supposedly pulled "messages from heaven" out of thin air.

The paper crackled when I opened the questions and my voice was pitched so high that those in the front rows must have heard the whispers. Then I whispered so low the mystic couldn't hear me and he had an awkward time of it until I hit on just the right pitch. Somehow we got through the act.

Matinees for women were, I found, as unpleasant as they were profitable. Practically every woman present would put questions to the medium and buy a book on mind-reading for 50 cents because it entitled her to ask the mystic a question privately. The women would wrestle and push and pull in the lineup and often we would still be answering their questions when it was time for the evening performance.

Then, too, women make terrible fools of themselves over "a gifted one," finding him a romantic figure. If some husbands knew how their spouses behave in the presence of a mystic they'd lock them up when such a person comes to town.

Numerous women professed to find a "soul mate" in the medium for whom I worked, and several of them all but put us out of business by following us from town to town "just to be near him."

Some of these cases were pitiful because the love-sick ones were sincere in their feelings, but most of them were embarrassing and exasperating.

SOME cities are more receptive than others to the bunk that fake mystics dispense. Denver was once such a city. We did our stuff there several times and the act went over so big that the medium decided to give the place more of his attention.

Arriving there one spring morning, we took a suite of rooms at a hotel and set up a sort of "Institute of the Occult" to which believers flocked.

We egged the customers on with an opening series of free lectures, and were soon conducting afternoon and evening classes, so great was the interest in our doings.

Classes were held in psycho-analysis, occultism, scientific living, reincarnation, even salesmanship and diet, and we stayed there several months, so ample was the revenue from our "school."

In addition to our lectures and classes, we gave private readings, private instruction for backward pupils, dashed off horoscopes and sold many volumes on which there was a handsome profit. Some of these books cost us a dollar and a half and were sold at five dollars and, on occasion, ten dollars.

We also gave special lectures to the employes of business firms and a half hour's spiel brought us fifty dollars.

So strong a hold did the mystic have on a certain element of the Denver public that he was invited to speak at one of their churches.

The minister of this church, finding it necessary to be absent from his pulpit for a time, asked the mystic to watch over his flock while he was away. And for three Sundays, my boss held the pulpit and taught in the Sunday school.

The many friends that the medium made in Denver believed in him so thoroughly that they planned to buy him an abandoned mining town where he could establish a colony and impart his great wisdom to others.

It is hard to imagine what sort of cult would have grown out of this scheme had not complications from sources outside the city moved the mystic to pull up stakes and be on his way.

Once my employer forgot he was an ex-pastor and a great teacher with a mission in life and drove his automobile off the highway while hitting fifty-five. When he recovered from his injuries he explained that he was blinded by the headlights of another car and his followers, all sympathy, believed him.

IN Kansas City we pulled a similar stunt by founding the "College of Scientific Living," which flourished for a time and, I suppose, petered out when the persuasive and clever head of the institution checked out for greener fields of endeavor.

In Buffalo, New York, the mystic founded no institution of his own but temporarily borrowed Buffalo University, so to speak. We were putting on our act in a local theater and, night after night, he announced that he held the chair of psychology at the local institution of learning.

Shortly, a representative of Uncle Sam called on us, for many of the medium's gullible believers had taken him at his word and swamped the university with letters containing questions and money.

The mystic immediately severed his self-made connection with Buffalo University and had to do a lot of smooth talking to worm out of a mean situation.

On one occasion when we were playing Niagara Falls, New York, some of the boys attending Niagara College set out determinedly to prove we were fakers. They made such a rumpus in the theater that police were called in, and with these officers and the students on the alert for trickery we were unable to work the act in the usual way.

We had managed to get the written questions of the audience out of the box at the entrance of the theater backstage, although one of our assistants was waylaid in the alley leading to the stage entrance and searched, to learn if he was toting the audience's queries back to the medium.

I had the "dummy" questions that the mystic was prepared to answer hidden in the sash of my costume and came near never reaching the stage with them, after some of the boys grabbed at me as I ran down the aisle. I slipped through their hands and placed the supposed questions of the audience on a table—but how to get the real questions off the stage I didn't know.

Our stage manager saved the day by quietly and secretly taking the real questions from me as I lay on my couch near the backdrop. Our underhanded manner of reading people's thoughts were not exposed, but we left Niagara Falls next morning with great sighs of relief.

ONE of the most tragic consequences of our phoney demonstrations of psychic power can be read in a letter I still have in my possession. It is from a girl to a mother she had never seen.

This letter reads in part: "Dearest Mother—I know just how surprised you are to receive this letter from your little girl you gave away 18 long years ago. . . . I have tried so long to find you and at last such a grand person related all to me . . . and I am looking anxiously for an answer from you. . . ."

That girl, seeking a mother's love and believing absolutely in the mystic, traveled 25 miles a day for several days to consult him. Needless to say, she never got a reply to that letter, for it had been sent to one of the girls who once worked in our company. She sent it back to me.

Sometimes, however, the mystic's mouthings did not turn out so tragically. Once, during our appearance in Saskatchewan, a man in the audience asked the question: "Will it be a boy or a girl?" and to get a laugh the mystic replied: "One of each." The next morning we were amazed to learn that the man's wife had presented him with twins—a boy and a girl! It is such lucky breaks as this that made followers for the mystic, turned skeptics into believers.

And having seen from the inside how flimsy most of the traveling medium's repertory of tricks are, I wonder that there are so many believers and so few skeptics.

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