

Neville J. Whymant (1894 – 1964?)

Although not a psychical researcher, *per se*, Dr. Neville J. Whymant (Sept. 4, 1894 to at least 1964, date of death undetermined) was involved in what is perhaps the most intriguing case in the annals of mediumship. Over a period of about two months, during the latter part of 1926, Whymant attended 12 sittings with medium George Valiantine at the New York City Park Avenue home of Judge and Mrs. William Cannon and was witness to phenomena that far exceeds the boggle threshold of most people. He reported on his experience in a 1931 book, *Psychic Adventures in New York*.

Born in Rothwell, England, Whymant earned his Ph.D. and Litt.D. at Oxford University. During the early 1920s, he was professor of Oriental literature and philosophy at the Universities of Tokyo and Peking and then a professor of linguistics at Oxford and London Universities. He served as Far East editor (1926-27) of the *New International Encyclopedia* and was on the editorial staff of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1927-29). He was also a foreign correspondent for the *London Times* (1929-31) and from 1947 to 1950 was an adviser to the embassy of the Republic of China in London. Among his other books were *Chinese and Greek Philosophical Parallels* (1917), *The Psychology of the Chinese Coolie* (1920), and *Psychical Research in China* (1925). It is said that Whymant could converse in at least 30 languages, including several dialects of Chinese.

Whymant was in the United States in 1926 to study the languages of Native Americans. When he and his wife were invited to the Cannon home for a dinner party during October 1926, he was not aware that a séance with Valiantine would follow the dinner. Mrs. Cannon explained

to him that she feared he would decline the invitation if she had told him what was going to take place. She further explained that she needed someone with knowledge of Oriental languages to do some interpreting as what seemed to be a Chinese-speaking spirit had been breaking in at prior sittings with Valiantine, a direct-voice medium (voices would come through an aluminum trumpet that floated around the room).



Before the sitting began, Whymant had a talk with Valiantine and wrote that he impressed him as “a typical example of the simpler kind of country American citizen.”¹

Having heard there were many charlatans posing as mediums, Whymant made a careful inspection of the room. “There was no appearance or suspicion of trickery,” he continued, “but I mention these things to show that I was alert from the beginning, and I was prepared to apply all the tests possible to whatever phenomena might appear.”²

As soon as the lights were turned off, the group recited the Lord's Prayer and then sacred music was played on a gramophone. Voices came through for other sitters before Mrs. Whymant's father communicated in his characteristic drawl, reminiscent of the West County of England. The group then heard the "sound of an old wheezy flute not too skillfully played."³ It reminded Whymant of sounds he had heard in the streets of China. All the while, Whymant kept an eye on Valiantine, who was sitting directly in front of him. Apparently, there was enough light in the room to see to some degree, as Whymant had a pencil and notebook and was able to take notes.

When the flute-like sound faded, Whymant heard a "voice" directed at him through the trumpet speaking in an ancient Chinese dialect. The name K'ung-fu-tzu was given and repeated. Whymant immediately recognized the name as that by which Confucius was canonized. "Chinese I had long regarded as my own special research area, and he would be a wise man, medium or other, who would attempt to trick me on such soil," Whymant recorded his reaction. "If this tremulous voice were that of the old ethicist who had personally edited the Chinese classics, then I had an abundance of questions to ask him."⁴

At that point, the "voice" was difficult to understand and Whymant had to ask for repetition. "Then it burst upon me that I was listening to Chinese of a purity and delicacy not now spoken in any part of China," Whymant continued the story. "...I realized that the style of Chinese used was identical with that of the Chinese Classics, edited by Confucius two-thousand five-hundred years ago."⁵ He went on to say that it was as dead colloquially as Sanskrit or Latin. "If this was a hoax, it was a particularly clever one, far beyond the scope of any of the sinologues now living."⁶

Apparently "Confucius" recognized that Whymant was having a difficult time understanding the ancient dialect and changed to a more

modern dialect. Whymant wondered how he could test the voice and remembered that there are several poems in Confucius' *Shih King* which have baffled both Chinese and Western scholars. He recalled the first line of the third ode of one of the poems, but could not recall the rest. The "voice" then took up the poem and recited the remaining 14 lines.

The "voice" put a new construction on the verses so that it made sense to Whymant. It was, the "voice" explained, a psychic poem. The mystery was solved. But Whymant had another test. He asked the "voice" about another poem, and referred to a passage that did not make sense. As Whymant started to recite the passage, the "voice" carried the passage to the end and explained that the copyists were in error, as the character written as *sê* should have been *i*, and the character written as *yen* is an error for *fou*.

"Again, all the winds had been taken out of my sails!" Whymant wrote, pointing out that the telepathic theory, i.e., the medium was reading his mind, would not hold up since he was unaware of the nature of the errors.⁷

There were several additional exchanges between Whymant and "Confucius" before the power began to fade. Whymant attended 11 additional sittings, dialoguing with the "voice" claiming to be Confucius in a number of them. At one sitting, another "voice" broke in speaking some strange French dialect. Whymant recognized it as Labourdin Basque. Although he was more accustomed to speaking Spanish Basque, he managed to carry on a conversation with the "voice."

"Altogether fourteen foreign languages were used in the course of the twelve sittings I attended," Whymant concluded the short book. "They included Chinese, Hindi, Persian, Basque, Sanskrit, Arabic, Portuguese, Italian, Yiddish, (spoken with great fluency when a Yiddish- and Hebrew-speaking Jew was a member of the circle), German and modern Greek."⁸

Whymant also recorded that at one sitting, Valiantine was carrying on a conversation in "American English" with the person next to him while foreign languages were coming through the trumpet. "I am assured, too, that it is impossible for anyone to 'throw his voice,' this being merely an illusion of the ventriloquist," he wrote.⁹

Upon returning to England in 1927, Whymant called upon Sir Oliver Lodge, the distinguished physicist and psychical researcher, to tell him of his experiences. Lodge then made arrangement to have Valiantine examined by the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). However, the SPR researchers heard only "whispers," some of which sounded like Chinese to them but were unclear. When the SPR asked Whymant to listen to the gramophone recording of the voices, he couldn't make them out, either. One SPR researcher, in her report, pointed out that there are many "Chinamen" living in America and Valiantine probably learned a little Chinese from them, enough to make Whymant think that he was hearing Chinese and he subconsciously filled in the blanks. It was an explanation suggesting that Whymant was a complete idiot. It also suggested that Valiantine learned enough of 13 other languages, including Sanskrit, to further dupe Whymant and also that he memorized the poems of "Confucius," or Whymant just imagined he heard the voice recite a lengthy poem and also imagined that "Confucius" explained the mistakes in one of them. In all likelihood, the SPR investigators did not provide the sympathetic link and harmony necessary for good communication to take place.

Not being a Spiritualist or psychical researcher, Whymant did not initially plan to write the book. However, tiring of telling the story so many times, he agreed to put it in writing, asking that with the publication of the book that others not ask him to tell the story again.

"It does not seem necessary to assume the actual presence of the great Chinese Sage himself," Sir Oliver Lodge wrote in the Introduction,

"but it is possible that some disciple of that period may be exerting himself, as so many others on that side are exerting themselves, to give scholarly proof of survival, and to awaken our dormant minds to possibilities in the universe to which we are for the most part blind and deaf."¹⁰

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¹ Whymant, Neville, *Psychic Adventures in New York*, May & Company, 1931, p. 18

² _____, p. 19

³ _____, p. 21

⁴ _____, p. 22

⁵ _____, p. 23

⁶ _____, p. 23

⁷ _____, p. 28

⁸ _____, p. 46

⁹ _____, p. 47

¹⁰ _____, p. vi