

Joseph “Ben” Jonson (1854-1930)

A resident of Toledo, Ohio and a descendant of Ben Jonson, the famous British poet and writer, Joseph B. “Ben” Jonson (October 16, 1854 to April 3, 1930) was a gifted materialization medium. He was investigated by Dr. John S. King, president of the Canadian Society for Psychical Research and Vice-Admiral W. Osborne Moore.

Jonson recalled that as a young boy in Akron, Ohio, where he was born, he heard unexplained noises, rappings, sounds of footfalls where no one was visible, and on one occasion saw a black-whiskered man who disappeared in front of him, but his father told him it was all his imagination. Upon moving to Springfield, Ohio, around age 18, he made friends with some Spiritualists and joined in a circle with them. “I got directions to build a cabinet, and soon obtained physical manifestations under strict test conditions, and some materializations developed,” he explained. “There occurred many things of an occult nature during my sojourn of four years among the friends I met in Springfield, and a decided development of my mediumship.”¹

After moving to Toledo in 1880, his employment as a painter interfered with his development and he did not become active again until 1901, when he married, his wife also having some mediumistic ability. In addition to materializations, he also developed as a direct-voice medium.

Before undertaking his investigation of the Jonsons, Moore conferred with a friend, Homer Taylor Yaryan, who had been chief of the secret police under the Grant Administration. “Mr. Yaryan is a detective of great skill, and the last man in America to allow himself to be bamboozled,”

Moore wrote. “The Jonsons have given séances in his house, one of which was as successful as those I am about to describe. He has watched these mediums carefully for years, and assured me that they are genuine.”²



Moore’s first sitting with the Jonsons was on January 4, 1909. However, conditions were not ideal and only minor phenomena developed, including a materialized hand that manifested twenty times or more. Moore took both of Jonson’s hands and placed them in his right hand and then touched the visible spirit hand with his left hand.

Two days later, however, conditions were more ideal. Three other sitters were present, referred to by Moore as Mr. and Mrs. Z and Mrs. J. After Moore and Mr. Z examined the cabinet, the room was darkened. “Within two minutes the figure of a woman, below medium height, dressed in a white robe with girdle round the waist, sprang up from the floor very close to the

medium, holding out her hands in my direction” Moore recorded. “I got up and went up close to the medium. From the building and proportions I was able to guess who this was. She tried to speak, but all I could catch was ‘Al’ or ‘Ali’; but, unfortunately (owing to our mutual anxiety, I presume), she dematerialized into the carpet before I could clearly distinguish the features. The same materialization and dematerialization occurred a second time with no more success. After a third abortive attempt she did not dematerialize into the floor, but simply faded away.”³

After that, some 15 or 16 materialized forms emerged from the cabinet and conversed with Mr. and Mrs. Z. and Mrs. J, while Jonson sat entranced in full view. A third sitting with Jonson was a failure.

Moore again sat with Jonson on January 16. “About twenty-five separate personalities manifested,” Moore wrote. “Counting the repetitions, there were over forty materializations or etherializations. For my part, I only saw the faces of two clearly enough for recognition. These were Viola (Mrs. Jonson’s guide), and Edna, the nun (who had come for Mr. Z in the January 6 sitting). Viola is a very lively girl of eighteen or nineteen, with long streaming hair; she touched my hand with hers. Edna came out four or five times, and gave me opportunities to see her face, dress, and cross quite plainly; Iola brought my father and mother. On one occasion I went to the entrance of the cabinet, and saw two forms together, which I soon discovered were my parents, and the small form of Iola behind them.”⁴ (Iola was said to be Moore’s spirit guide. She had manifested with other mediums in England.)

Moore noted that a clear identification was not always possible, especially if conditions were not good. Yaryan explained to him that they could usually be identified by their distinctive movements, dress, and carriage. While ruling out trap doors and other means of entry into the room and further noting that confederates employed by the Jonsons would have had to make their way

through the circle and then back out the circle, since there was no place for them to hide. Moore saw the confederate theory as an impossibility. He further reasoned that, given the number of manifestations, the Jonsons would have to employ dozens, if not hundreds, of people, including children, and it would have been impossible to keep such imposture a secret in the community for any length of time.

At a sitting on January 29, Moore sat alone with the Jonsons. “Jonson passed into the trance state in about ten minutes,” Moore recorded. “In less than five minutes later, Iola rose slowly out of the floor in front of me, outside the cabinet, and passed in between the curtains ... I went to the opening with Mrs. Jonson, who invariably accompanies the sitter (to lend additional power to the manifestations), and asked the spirit, ‘Did you make that inscription on the picture?’ A whisper came, ‘With the help of others.’ My guide then sank into the floor.”⁵ (The reference was to a picture of Iola produced by the Bang Sisters, Chicago mediums.)

Several other figures appeared, including a former brother naval officer, followed by his father and mother. “In these there was no possibility of error,” Moore wrote. “My father had a nose like the Iron Duke, and I saw him in good light three feet outside the cabinet; his prominent feature was clearly distinguishable. Three men came out whom I did not know; one was said to be Mr. Marshall Fields, a wealthy merchant of Chicago, but, as I never knew him, nor heard of him before this evening, I cannot answer for his identity.”⁶

At his farewell séance on February 1st, a total of 19 separate spirits manifested, including Iola and his father and mother. “One old relative appeared to me, whom I recognized. I kissed her, as I would when she was in earth life, and she returned it, but the effect was too much for her, and she fell over on her side and vanished.”⁷

Moore also witnessed two failed materializations. “The figure of a woman tried to build

up outside the cabinet, but collapsed before it was completed; and there was one brilliant etherialization outside that fell and dissipated after rising two feet.”⁸

Moore spoke with a materialized spirit named Tim O’Brien, who told him that it is not possible to tell him much of their side or of the motives which govern spirits as he would not understand. He would have to wait until he went over to that side.

Two years earlier, in 1907, researcher Hereward Carrington of the Society for Psychical Research observed Jonson at the Lily Dale Spiritualist camp and wrote him off as a fraud. Although Carrington would eventually be won over to a belief in Spiritualism, including physical phenomena, he was known primarily as a debunker at that time, especially of physical mediumship. Both Carrington’s objectivity and scientific acumen are clearly in question from his report. He found nothing conclusive relative to fraud and only speculated on how the “tricks” might have been done. As an example, he noted that a cabinet curtain could be seen blowing with every materialization and saw this as highly suggestive of fraud. However, Dr. Cesare Lombroso, the distinguished Italian physician and researcher, reported “undulations, inflations, and flingings” of the curtain of the cabinet in his investigation of Eusapia Paladino and saw it as a “true spouting fountain of air” related to the materialization phenomenon.

A “form” came to Carrington claiming to be that of his long-deceased sister. He reported that his sister died just after birth before he was even born and so he had no way of verifying this was his sister. Moreover, he stated that she appeared as a girl of about 17, whereas his sister would have been about 40 had she lived. He saw this as evidence of fraud. Carrington seems to have been unaware of spirit testimony that infants continue to grow in the spirit world and that they often show themselves as a prime age. At

that time, a woman of 40 might not have appeared in the prime of life.

Carrington’s report made no mention of whether anyone at the séance knew he was coming or knew anything of his family history, including whether he had a deceased sister. Since Carrington was born in England and moved to the United States in 1899, at age 19, it would have been extremely difficult for Jonson to have explored his family history.

Carrington ended his report by saying that there had been another report of Jonson being a fraud, and so he saw no point in further discussing it.

“It is hardly necessary for me to say that the Jonsons have been accused of fraud, like all other professional psychics, good, bad, and indifferent,” Moore wrote. “I have never heard of any instance where a definite charge has been brought against them and proved. All I know of are the usual slanders by other competing mediums, by well-intentioned friends of the sitters, and writings private and public, by authors of the arm-chair type.”⁹

Dr. King sat with the Jonsons during November 1911 and witnessed numerous materialization during his three séances. “The majority of the forms I saw in the three seances in November materialized inside the cabinet, and returning towards the cabinet, disappeared as they got to the opening of the curtains, but without entering the cabinet,” he reported. “A few materialized outside of the cabinet, and several were materialized inside the cabinet, while Jonson sat at one end of the semi-circle of people part of the time, and another part of the time he walked along in front of the line of sitters, drawing magnetism from them to build the forms inside the cabinet, so Grey Feather, his Indian spirit guide, explained through Jonson’s vocal organs; and lastly a part of the time was spent on the inside of the cabinet.”¹⁰

During the third séance, King took a stenographer to write down everything. There were 19 materializations at this sitting, the 10th being

his deceased daughter, May Donna, and the 11th his deceased wife, May. "Beautiful and strong, and so convincingly natural as to overcome a strong man's self-control, Dr. King's wife stood materialized before him, speaking the following comforting words," James Harbaugh, the stenographer recorded. "'Don't cry, dear Johnnie. My dear, this life is beautiful, all brightness and joy. Oh, dear one, I love you so, and the love we feel on earth only grows stronger and more beautiful on our side.'"¹¹

King observed that May was a perfect duplicate of his wife, including form, features, voice, and mannerism, together with tangibility, power, and zeal. As May spoke with him, she talked of personal matters, which, King added, could not possibly have been known to Jonson or anyone in the room.

King sat with Jonson again on April 15, 1912, taking along a stenographer this time as well. Again, his wife and daughter materialized, and, for the first time, his father. "Before leaving the Doctor," stenographer Minnie Noble recorded of King's meeting with his wife, "she showed her warm affection by patting him gently on his shoulder and smoothing his hair with her fingers, and kissing him audibly, twice on his right cheek, bade him a good-bye, and disappeared from sight."¹²

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¹ King, John S., *Dawn of the Awakened Mind*, James A. McCann Co., 1920, p. 115

² Moore, W. Osborne, *Glimpses of the Next State*, Watts & Co., 1911, p. 84

³ _____ p. 85

⁴ _____ p. 88

⁵ _____ p. 90

⁶ _____ p. 90

⁷ _____ p. 93

⁸ _____ p. 93

⁹ _____ p. 93

¹⁰ King, John S. *Dawn of the Awakened Mind*, The James A. McCann Co., 1920, p. 99

¹¹ _____ p. 108

¹² _____ p. 236