A Cameo Reappearance

The Survival Files — Case 64 — ESS = 264

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Olive Thomas' suicide was the act of a young Hollywood star who couldn't handle her fame, fortune, and bacchanalian lifestyle. So said the news headlines in 1920. … She herself told quite a different story 10 years later.

Thomas' rise to movie stardom had been meteoric. Starting as a Ziegfeld girl in 1914, on the day of her death her name was spelled out in lights on the marquees of five different theaters on Broadway. Her exceptional beauty and fame helped sell many a newspaper detailing a night of debauchery leading to suicide in a Paris hotel room. The falsity of those details somehow went unnoticed in the media frenzy.

As a youth, J. Gay Stevens had a crush on Olive Thomas. He never met her, but he collected photographs of her. This was one reason her spirit gave for contacting him through the mediumship of Chester Grady.[1]

Stevens, a member of the American Society of Psychical Research, had just started a series of sittings with Grady at the ASPR headquarters in New York City, when the spirit of Thomas came through. She was most anxious to contact her mother, she said, to convince her that the newspaper stories of wild parties, immorality, and self-destruction were not true.

The truth, she claimed was that after visiting a few nightclubs in Montmartre with some friends, she and her husband, Jack Pickford,[2] had retired early to their hotel because he had to catch a morning flight to London. Not feeling sleepy, and not wanting to waken her husband by turning on a light, Thomas decided to take a sleeping potion. Unfortunately, the bottle she opened was not her bromides but what Stevens refers to as "a contraceptive commonly used by women in those days" – bichloride of mercury.

Immediately upon swallowing this toxic substance, Thomas dropped her glass and screamed in agony. Her husband jumped from bed in alarm. He tried having her drink soapy water as an emetic, but it did no good. He called the hotel staff for assistance. Then – the hotel kitchen being closed for the night – he rushed out to a local store in search of butter and milk. But nothing could be done. According to Stevens, by the time medical help arrived, Thomas' system "had absorbed enough poison to wipe out the population of a small town."[3] Four days later, she died in a Parisian hospital and, despite there being nothing in the police reports to suggest any intent on her part, the newspapers reported her "suicide" to a shocked world.

Neither the medium nor the sitter had ever heard this story before, and no such version could be found in any newspaper of the time. Nevertheless, it was confirmed by the reports kindly provided by the Paris police, and by a biography of Mary Pickford that was published 24 years later.

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[1] Chester Michael Grady was a highly respected trance medium endorsed by the ASPR. He is known for his work with Stewart Edward White (*The Betty Book*) , Frederick Bligh Bond (Glastonbury Abbey), and Gardner Murphy. Grady died the year the source article was published.

[2] An actor, writer, and producer who was the brother of star Mary Pickford.

[3] This story is largely based on, and all quotes are taken from, a two-part article titled "The Girl with the Golden Hair" by Stevens that appeared in *Fate* magazine in December of 1972 and January of 1973.

Thomas was excited to hear of the police confirmation and urged Stevens to contact her mother with the information. She then provided her mother's name – Van Kirk – and location – Leonia, NJ. A local phone book gave Stevens the address and he paid the lady a visit in April of 1931. His reception was less than cool. Mrs. Van Kirk had been disgraced by what she considered to be a smear campaign by the newspapers and was distrustful of anyone interested in her daughter. Beyond that, she was a staunch believer that her Bible forbade any contact with spirits of the dead.[4]

Realizing that he would have to get stronger evidence, Stevens continued to sit with Grady and the spirit of Thomas provided a plethora of intimate details about Thomas' life with her mother and her first marriage. Stevens lists over a dozen of these as highlights, and then says that altogether he compiled more than 20 pages of notes. These he delivered to Van Kirk, who promised to read them. This she did and, when Stevens next came to call, she actually smiled at him and, for the first time, invited him to come inside her home.

"In the name of common sense I should accept this," she told him, "but I can't. I have to go too far from what I deeply believe." So Stevens left the Van Kirk household, wondering if he should pursue the matter any further.

But Thomas insisted that they continue. "We've unlocked that closed door in her mind. It's opening and she's beginning to see the light. We can't leave her now. We've got to help her!" And at the next session, Thomas revealed just how her mother could be convinced. The ensuing demonstration stands as one of the most convincing ever witnessed in the annals of Survival investigations.

After her death, Thomas said, her mother had auctioned off all of her jewelry except for one piece. That piece was a cameo brooch made of lapis, flecked with gold, and surrounded by eight tiny pearls. It had been handcrafted by a famous London jeweler and was her very favorite. For a long time, said Thomas, she had been puzzled as to why her mother had not sold this cameo, then she realized that her mother did not even know where it was. After some mental searching, she located it and figured out what had happened.

She had been wearing that brooch the night she died. When her husband packed her clothes in her steamer trunk to return them to the States, he had removed the pin from her frock, placed it in its thin cloisonné case, and put it in a side pocket of the trunk. The rest of her jewelry had already been packed separately. During shipment, the jostling of the trunk caused the case to become lodged between the gathered end of the pocket and the trunk's lining; a place where it was impossible to see and difficult to feel. A place where it remained to that day, in her steamer trunk, sitting beside a small window, in her mother's attic. Also, she said, one of the pearls had become dislodged from its setting and was loose in the tissue paper wrapped around the cameo.

When told all of this her mother protested. She had looked through that trunk several times and there was no jewelry in it. Besides, her daughter had never been in her current house, let alone in its attic. But Stevens was insistent, and more to placate him than out of any belief in his words, she led the way into the attic.

The trunk was situated just as Thomas, via Grady, had described. The mother proceeded to remove all the clothing and showed Stevens the empty trunk. He asked her to examine the side

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[4] For a discussion of why she felt this way, see *The 'Sin' of Speaking with Spirits* at http://www.thesurvivalfiles.com/documents.shtml .

pockets. She did so, but found nothing. “Dig deep into the end of each pocket,” he instructed. She did so, and “suddenly recoiled – as if something had nipped her fingers.” She felt something metal, but she could not pry it loose, so Stevens reached into the pocket. “It took some effort to free the object from its jammed position,” he relates. “Soon, however, I was holding the cloisonné case up to the light before Mrs. Van Kirk’s ashen face.”

They took the case down to the kitchen table and carefully unwrapped the tissue from the brooch. The loose pearl dropped out and rolled across the table.

Discussion

Some critics, apparently searching for any reason not to believe this story, have wondered why the mother was unaware of the true facts of her daughter’s death. Would not the husband have reported these to his mother-in-law? There are at least three feasible explanations for this.

- First, perhaps he did tell her and she thought he may have been lying to protect himself.
- Second, perhaps he did tell her and she believed him but was upset because the newspapers had ruined her daughter’s reputation. It is true that Stevens reported Thomas’ concern with getting the truth to her mother, but while Thomas could apparently tell that her mother was upset, there is nothing to indicate that she could read her mother’s mind and thus know the exact cause of her torment.
- Third, perhaps the husband and mother were estranged, or he did not discuss the matter with her for some other reason of his. Pickford, known for his wild lifestyle, married two other actresses (in sequence) before dying of syphilis in 1933.

As for the bichloride of mercury, it has been pointed out that this substance was a treatment for syphilis, although Stevens refers to it as “a contraceptive commonly used by women in those days.” Jack Pickford could well have had syphilis at the time. This could have provided motivation for not telling Thomas’ mother the truth. The fact is, however, that both statements are true: bichloride of mercury (otherwise known as corrosive sublimate) was sometimes used to treat syphilis, but it was also commercially sold as a vaginal douche and used as an abortifacient. If a few drops added to a quart or so of water were intended to wipe out anything alive in the vagina (or uterus), a swallow or two of the undiluted poison would certainly be fatal.

Admittedly, these questions are loose ends, but loose ends only matter if they threaten to unravel the story. The key facts are solid and the unanswered questions should not greatly lessen the strength of the case.

The reception by a medium of information detailing the precise location, situation, and detailed description of a unique object with which neither the medium nor the sitter have any link and of which no living person is aware, belies any credible explanation other than Survival. The 20 pages of personal details known only to the mother, which normally would make an eye-catching case themselves, are virtually lost in the shadow of the reappearing cameo.

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