

Hornby Apparition

In this late nineteenth century episode, a published account of a supposedly apparitional vision was retracted following the emergence of certain discrepancies. The case has been cited as an example of fallible testimony tending to discredit such claims, but an alternative explanation has been noted.

Account

At the time of the incident in 1875, Sir Edmund Hornby was serving in Shanghai, then run by a British colonial administration, as chief judge of the Supreme Consular Court of China and Japan.^[1] He retired the following year. In around 1883 he was one of many people who responded to a public appeal by researchers of the newly-founded [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR) for reports of seemingly psychic experiences. The investigators considered Hornby's account to be an especially striking instance of what they termed 'crisis apparitions', those of a person seen at a time when he or she was in fact close to death in another location. Accordingly, they offered it for publication to [The Nineteenth Century](#), an upmarket British monthly, where it appeared in 1884.

Hornby related that he had just gone to sleep when he was woken by a local press reporter knocking on the door of his bedroom. The man, whom Hornby knew, asked him to give details of a judgement he'd made during the course of the day, for publication in next morning's paper. In other circumstances this would have been a normal procedure: Hornby wrote the judgements in the evening and allowed reporters to come to his house to collect them. But he did not expect to see the man in his bedroom after the house had been locked and he had gone to sleep. He was infuriated by the intrusion, but eventually complied with the request and the man left.

Hornby's account was as follows:

I had gone to sleep, when I was awakened by hearing a tap at the study door, but thinking it might be the butler ... I turned over with the view of getting to sleep again. Before I did so, I heard a tap at my bedroom door. Still thinking it might be the butler ... I said, "Come in." The door opened, and, to my surprise, in walked Mr. _____. I sat up and said, "You have mistaken the door; but the butler has the judgment, so go and get it." Instead of leaving the room he came to the foot edge of the bed. I said, "Mr. _____, you forget yourself! Have the goodness to walk out directly. This is rather an abuse of my favour." He looked deadly pale, but was dressed in his usual dress, and was certainly quite sober, and said, "I know I am guilty of an unwarrantable intrusion, but finding that you were not in your study I have ventured to come here."

I was losing my temper, but something in the man's manner disinclined me to jump out of bed to eject him by force. So I said simply, "This is too bad, really; pray leave the room at once." Instead of doing so he put one hand on the foot-rail and gently, and as if in pain, sat down on the foot of the bed ... I said, "The

butler has had the judgment since half-past eleven; go and get it.” He said, “Pray forgive me; if you knew all the circumstances you would. Time presses. Pray give me a *précis* of your judgment, and I will take a note in my book of it,” drawing his reporter’s book out of his breast pocket. I said, “I will do nothing of the kind. Go downstairs, find the butler, and don’t disturb me—you will wake my wife; otherwise I shall have to put you out.” He slightly moved his hand. I said, “Who let you in?” He answered, “No one.” “Confound it,” I said, “what the devil do you mean? Are you drunk?” He replied, quietly, “No, and never shall be again; but I pray your lordship give me your decision, for my time is short.” I said, “You don’t seem to care about *my* time, and this is the last time I will ever I allow a reporter in my house.” He stopped me short, saying, “This is the *last* time I shall ever see you anywhere.”

Well, fearful that this commotion might arouse and frighten my wife, I shortly gave him the gist of my judgment in as few words as I could. He seemed to be taking it down in shorthand; it might have taken two or three minutes. When I finished, he rose, thanked me ... opened the door, and went away. I looked at the clock; it was on the stroke of half-past one.^[2]

Lady Hornby then woke and he explained to her what had just happened.

The next morning, court staff informed the judge that the reporter had died the night before. His wife had found him in his room, his notebook lying on the floor. In it was written, ‘In the Supreme Court, before the Chief Judge: The Chief Judge gave judgment this morning in the case to the following effect’ followed by what Hornby describes as ‘a few lines of indecipherable shorthand’.

According to Hornby, a doctor called to the scene estimated that the reporter had died at about 1 am, approximately the time of the encounter; an inquest determined cause of death as heart disease. Hornby ascertained from the butler that the house had been properly secured, meaning that no one without a key could have entered. A magistrate had the reporter’s widow and servants confirm that he could not have left his own house without them noticing. Hornby stated, ‘As I said then, so I say now – I was not asleep, but wide awake. After a lapse of nine years my memory is quite clear on the subject. I have not the least doubt I saw the man – have not the least doubt that the conversation took place between us.’^[3]

Discrepancies

In a later issue, *The Nineteenth Century* published a letter by one Frederick H Balfour, a Shanghai resident who knew both men. Balfour identified the reporter as Hugh Lang Nivens, editor of the *Shanghai Courier*, and stated that he had in fact died not around 1 am but 8 or 9 am. He further claimed that there was no judgment rendered on the day in question and that there had been no inquest (contradicting Hornby). He also revealed that there had been no Lady Hornby at the time: Hornby’s second wife had died two years before and he did not marry again until three months later.^[4]

Nineteenth Century showed Balfour’s letter to Hornby before publishing it. He conceded that his vision must have followed the death (some three months) instead

of synchronizing with it, but otherwise strongly maintained that his memory of the incident was accurate.^[5] The SPR meanwhile retracted its report and issued an apology.

Discussion

The case is often cited by sceptic authors as a reason to distrust testimony about psychic experiences. In a 1917 book, American psychologist John E Coover wrote: 'All these discrepancies are concordant with the results of psychological research on testimony, and are to be attributed to psychological law rather than to either dishonesty or culpable carelessness.'^[6]

CEM Hansel devoted three pages to the case in his 1966 book *ESP and Parapsychology: A Scientific Evaluation*, concluding that the eminence of the person making a report of this kind is no guarantee against errors of memory and recall.^[7]

Neither Coover nor Hansel attempted any detailed account of the mechanics of this lapse of memory. Andrew Neher has suggested that Hornby might have forgotten hearing about the death of Nivens three months earlier, then had a dream about it, creating the illusion of a premonition.^[8] But this scenario conflicts with Hornby's account and leaves unexplained the sense of shock that caused him to remember it so vividly.^[9]

No explanation appears to have been offered for the first three of the claimed discrepancies, assuming these could be confirmed. That there was an alternative explanation for the detail of Hornby not being married, one that did not alter the paranormality of the case, is suggested by the following comment made by James Hyslop, an American psychical researcher.

I had received the explanation of the case from Dr. [Richard Hodgson](#), who showed that the discrepancy in the story was only apparent, and that the facts were so personal and private that it was imperative that the incident be withdrawn, but that the case was not in the least impaired by the investigation. I am not at liberty, even now, to tell the facts; but if any one were to know them, he would at once appreciate the reason for withdrawing the case, while he would admit its evidential character.^[10]

As author Robert McLuhan has pointed out, this seems to suggest that Hornby, in relating the incident to researchers, had inadvertently revealed that he had been sleeping with his fiancée before they were married, a fact that in Victorian Britain would have brought her into disrepute had it become known. This having been pointed out, Hornby may have felt he had no choice but to admit that he must have misplaced the incident in time, out of loyalty to his wife, and this in turn obliged the researchers to retract the case.^[11]

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Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ The episode is discussed by Coover (1927), Hansel (1980), Neher (1990), and McLuhan (2010).
2. ^ Cited in Hansel (1980), 44-46.
3. ^ Cited in Hansel (1980), 46.
4. ^ Cited in Hansel (1980), 46.
5. ^ Cited in Hansel (1980), 46.
6. ^ Coover (1927), cited in Hansel (1980), 46.
7. ^ Hansel (1980), 44-46.
8. ^ Neher (1990), 139.
9. ^ McLuhan (2010), 235-37
10. ^ Hyslop (1909), 271.
11. ^ McLuhan (2010), 237.