

Mrs. Laura A. Dale, Editor, The Journal of The American Society for Psychical Research,
5 West 73rd Street,
New York City, N. Y. 10023.

March 22, 1977

Dear Editor:

In your January 1977 number, in their report, "The Appearance and Disappearance of Objects in the Presence of Sri Sathya Sai Baba," authors Erlendur Haraldsson and Karlis Osis express their belief that, "The most impressive incident we personally observed was the disappearance of the enamel picture of Sai Baba from K. O.'s ring. The sleight-of hand hypothesis seems inapplicable because Sai Baba's hands, or those of potential accomplices, never came near the ring during the incident. We do not have a reasonable normal explanation for this disappearance." They also "consulted a professional magician living in New York"--- "recommended to us as one of the most knowledgeable magicians in the world"---who "viewed a movie on Sai Baba and discussed our observations of objects appearing and disappearing. He was certain that he could by his magician's art duplicate all the cases he saw on the film. However, he considered the ring incident to be beyond the skills of magicians. He also said that if Sai Baba does produce objects upon demand, this would be a feat no magician could duplicate."

No report merits definitive value in any case of alleged paranormality unless the conditions established exclude all possibility of fraud, for one thing, whether fraud did or did not actually place. Unfortunately, the Haraldsson-Osis report, even with respect to this "most impressive incident," fails to pass this criterion. Consider the following possibility which, it seems obvious, did not arise in the minds of the reporting witnesses---else they would have discussed and eliminated it from consideration, had they been able to do so.

1. In the first place, we are told that “the gold ring” in question was one “that Sai Baba had presented to K.O. during our first visit.” From this, we must assume that Sai Baba had it within his capacity to provide a second, one which would pass superficial examination as being indistinguishable from the first gold ring. However, as a basis for doubt, any such suspicion of duplication would have been diminished---intentionally or otherwise---when, at their “next interview,” Sai Baba “asked K.O. if he wanted the picture back” (after it vanished from the ring containing it); and, upon being told he did, and after receiving the pictureless ring (presumably relinquished with the owner’s soon-to-be-thwarted expectation of getting it back with the missing portrait restored), Sai Baba took it in his hand and made it too disappear, replacing it---after some manipulation---with still another and “different” one (first exhibited when he opened his closed hand, showing this new one bore an “enamel picture... like the one that had been framed in the first ring.”).

2. We may accept the authors’ bare statement that the original picture (“in color of Sai Baba”) was indeed an “enameled picture” (presumably enamel-on-metal), one of “about 2 cm long and 1½ cm wide” securely “fixed in the ring” by “four little notches that protruded over it from the circular golden frame” so that it would have been necessary “to break the picture in the ring” to remove it. Even if one or two of the enclosing notches were sufficiently malleable to permit removing the picture without much force and damage, it would seem unlikely this would have been done during the “interview” of their “second visit” when in fact “the picture disappeared.” What would be of greater probability---if we hypothesize fraud---is that sometime prior to this interview, the original ring with its enameled picture was taken by one of Sai Baba’s “accomplices” (assuming he had need of any; and, as a precaution, Haraldsson and Osis ought to have prudently considered everyone around them, not previously and personally known to be

uninterested, as “potential accomplices”) and surreptitiously exchanged for a similar ring bearing a similar picture but with the picture painted or “enameled” on thin wax.

One can only guess as to when opportunity for such substitution could have occurred. If our reporters were stopping in a guest house on the Sai Baba estate or at a nearby hostel frequented by Sai Baba’s followers and served by attendants of his sect (“potential accomplices”), surreptitious substitution might have been made at most any time of day or night just before the “second interview” or visit; or, otherwise, by a Sai Baba confederate masquerading as a devotee visiting the premises of the interview at the time of the “second visit,” one who, with apparent enthusiasm for the previous “miracle” of the ring’s initial appearance, asked to examine it closely and made the necessary exchange by sleight-of-hand when obligingly handed the original ring by Dr. Osis for a moment of reverent scrutiny. It is, of course, too late in the day to receive any assurance that the original ring was never removed from his finger from the time first put on until the “disappearance” of “the picture.” With no foresight whatsoever of the critical part it was to play in a second, unanticipated “miracle,” its owner could have had no reluctance towards permitting the original ring to be freely examined by strangers in his presence. (Are there not Indian artisans skilled in preparing painted wax images for religious purposes?)

3. Assuming that the reporters had taken the trouble necessary to actually verify their evident belief that the original picture was one of enamel-on-metal, no such opportunity (or need) for a second verification of content was likely between the time now suggested for substitution and the subsequent “disappearance” of picture. Up to the instant of the “vanishing act,” those present (including E.H.) naturally would see the (substituted) ring with its picture on K.O.’s finger and have no reason to suspect that it was not the original obtained at the earlier interview. All that would be necessary to make the painted wax picture disappear would be to

bring near it a lighted cigarette or a heated, flameless electric or chemical cigar-lighter. An opaque oval of wax of the dimensions cited may be melted away in such a manner in 3 or 4 seconds, without any heat being felt on the underside of a thin knife-blade holding the wax, as I have ascertained by experiment; and any residue would drop away (or could be blown away under the mask of a cough), unseen on the floor of the room, to go unnoticed and unrecognized during the subsequent search for a “missing” oval of colored, enameled metal (“We looked for it on the floor, but no trace of it could be found”).

All that we are told of the immediate circumstances attending the “picture’s” disappearance, suggests the ease with which such a “vanishing act” might have gone unnoted. It was at a critical moment when the full attentions of both Haraldsson and Osis (“we”) were directed away from the vicinity of the ring and, instead, riveted intently upon Sai Baba (sitting before and above them, as they “sat cross-legged on the floor”). Just then they seem to have been concentrating all their faculties upon persuading the Hindu Guru to submit to truly scientific experiment, the chief object of their visit, we must believe (“...when we tried to persuade Sai Baba to participate in some controlled experiments, he seemed to become impatient and said to K.O., ‘Look at your ring.’ The picture had disappeared from it”). Moreover, “K.O. had his hands on his thighs”---at least during most of this interval, we can assume, so that an “accomplice” would have had ample opportunity to unobtrusively accomplish the “miracle” in the required few seconds of inattention while Haraldsson and Osis were engrossed in their crucial conversation with Sai Baba. The prudent reader, of course, will not even be persuaded that anyone knows on which hand Dr. Osis was then wearing the ring---much less than it can be truthfully said that someone sat here and someone else there! Quite rightly, when “the picture” could not be found---whether dissolved by heat or occult power---, “Sai Baba somewhat teasingly remarked, ‘This

was my experiment.” Psychologically, one would expect some distortion of memory to follow on the excitement of discovery and the ensuing commotion during search for the missing “enamel” picture.

What is most frustrating to the informed student of the history of Psychical Research, in cases like this, is to see reports of such ambiguous experiences prepared and published (and, as this one, quickly taken up in the national press) without any appreciation or discussion of the pitfalls that are as prevalent today in reportorial methodology as they were a hundred years ago in this field; and to see scarce money wasted on such ineffectual undertakings (we are told, “This research was financed through the A.S.P.R.’s James Kidd inheritance fund” in part---expenditure which might have been avoided by determining beforehand whether Sri Sathya Sai Baba would or would not submit to “some controlled experiments”). In this writer’s humble opinion, Parapsychologists would do far better at much less expense by spending more time studying and re-examining the voluminous available records of past cases---thereby trying to first establish productive investigative guide-lines (of which little is ever said), so as to avoid the errors and shortcomings of past generations of researchers and reporters, profiting from their sad experiences---, rather than by rushing headlong into costly “investigations” which only repeat the mistakes of the past and open the field to public attack by skeptics. More than 90 years ago, wherever she went, trailing on three continents wonders which put those of Sai Baba in the shade, Madame Blavatsky was famous for her ability to “produce objects upon demand,” together with other mysterious accomplishments. Among reported instances of her satisfying spontaneous requests (sometimes only mentally expressed, it was said) were her productions of a cigar holder for the editor of India’s leading newspaper; of a letter sealed within an intact pillow designated by the editor’s wife; of a cup and saucer, matching a rare pattern, required for an

unexpected guest at a Simla picnic attended by India's Post-Master General and by the Chief of the Indian Secret Police (C.I.D.); of a diploma then requested for the Police Chief; of a lost brooch for the wife of a former Secretary to the Government of India; of a handkerchief embroidered with his name for the chief engineer of an ocean steamer; of the "doubling" of a \$1,000 banknote in the hand of a former U.S. Minister to Portugal. An 1885 Committee of the British Society for Psychological Research wholly discounted the lot, and Dr. Richard Hodgson undertook to explain some of them in terms of palpable fraud (after he was sent to India on investigation at the personal expense of the Committee Chairman and President of the S.P.R., Professor Henry Sidgwick)¹. Of course, no one who knows anything of the scientific requirements of Psychological Research, would today expect to find proof of the authenticity of these "productions on demand" of long ago. But in such cases we can discover much of essential value and guidance respecting the problems (still with us!) of observation, investigation, recording and reporting, and of the values of critical analysis. Unfortunately however, this realization is rare among those of each succeeding generation of Psychological Researchers who, in the exuberance of their naive enthusiasm, think themselves wiser than their forbears and now at last on the threshold of a great "breakthrough," having little patience with the annals of the past! It is to just this heedless spirit that one has to attribute the absence in this Journal of any review of the 1963 publication of some of the unprecedented findings of my own critical re-examination of the famous Theosophical case in its relation to Dr. Hodgson's claims of having exposed Madame Blavatsky as a thorough-going trickster². With more attention to this and other instructive past controversies, the A.S.P.R.'s James Kidd Inheritance Fund and other financial resources might

¹ See: Walter A. Carrithers, Jr. "Madame Blavatsky : 'One of the World's Great Jokers.'" Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research, 1962, LVI, 131-139.

² Adlai E. Waterman (pseudonym). Obituary: The 'Hodgson Report' on Madame Blavatsky:1885-1960. (Available from the writer. \$3.00, cloth; \$2.00, paperback.) Reviewed by Professor R. H. Thouless (a former President of the

be spared the unnecessary and expensive cost of providing lessons learned better and more cheaply from our illustrious predecessors!

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cc: Professor A.J. Ellison, President, The Society for Psychical Research.

S.P.R. and of the British Psychological Society) in The Journal, S.P.R., 1968, 44, 341-349; with reply by the author, Ibid., 1969, 45, 188-197.