

The Mysterious Death of Edgar Vandy

— Case 39 —

Edgar Vandy was a brilliant young engineer and inventor who lived in London with his family (mother, sister, and two brothers). At the time of his death, Edgar¹ was involved with several engineering projects involving telephony, radio, and other electro-mechanical devices. His largest and most promising project was known as the Lectroline Drawing Machine, a machine that could precisely create lines and lettering on plates suitable for use on printing presses. The Lectroline could enable one person to do the work of several craftsmen. A lot of time and family money had been expended in the creation of this machine, and the details of the prototype's operation were a closely guarded secret.

On August 6, 1933, Edgar went for a ride in the country with a friend, referred to only as Mr. Jameson² or "N.J." and Jameson's sister. They ended up at an estate in Sussex owned by the sister's employer, who was not there at the time. It being a particularly hot and very sunny day, the trio decided to go for a swim in a pool on the estate grounds. The pool was lined with concrete and had a diving board, but the bottom was coated with slime and sediment that, when stirred up, made the water so cloudy that one could see no more than a few inches beneath the surface.

Such a condition of dense turbidity was what confronted Edgar's would-be rescuers when they arrived in response to Jameson's summons. Although only seven feet down, the body could not be seen, even when the pool was half-drained.

At the inquest, Jameson testified that he and Edgar had gone behind heavy shrubbery some ways from the pool to change into swim wear. Edgar had not brought a swimsuit so Jameson's sister loaned him one. Edgar changed quicker and went ahead. When Jameson arrived he saw Edgar floating face down in the water. Jumping in immediately, Jameson tried to save him, but he slipped from his grasp and sank. Jameson then retreated from the pool and went to find help, which did not arrive until an hour later.

The doctor who was present when Edgar's body was pulled from the murky water, noted that there were slight abrasions beneath the chin and the tongue had been bitten through. Some scrapes were also found on the body's left side and right shoulder. Also, there was less fluid in the lungs than usual in drowning victims. These facts led to the theory that the young man had struck his jaw while diving into the pool and been knocked unconscious. The coroner accepted all of this testimony and returned a verdict of "Death by Drowning by Misadventure."

Edgar's two brothers, Harold and George Vandy, were not satisfied with this verdict. From a contemporary standpoint, in a world full of forensic TV dramas, it is easy to sympathize with their doubts. Actually, we can only marvel at their restraint in not raising specific questions. How, for instance, did the pool water get so stirred up that it was still impenetrable an hour after Jameson climbed out? Or, was the water always so turbid? If so, is it conceivable that a highly intelligent man would have dived into it without any idea what lay beneath? (Edgar, by

¹ First names are used here to distinguish among Edgar and his brothers.

² A pseudonym.

the way, was a poor swimmer and was never known to dive into anything.)

Perhaps most out of the ordinary is that a man unfamiliar with a place would “go ahead,” leaving his friend to finish changing alone. Also difficult to believe is that Jameson could not manage to drag Edgar, who was not a large fellow, to safety in such a small and fairly shallow pool with no currents or other endangering conditions. And what would possess someone to think that they could find help in less time than it would take for a man to drown?

Then there is the matter of the sister who clearly instigated the visit to her boss’ home, encouraged Edgar to enter the pool by providing him with a swim suit from who-knows-where, and then seems to have disappeared forever. She did not appear to help her brother rescue Edgar; she did not appear at the inquest, and couldn’t be traced later. The fact that she worked for a very wealthy (and thus influential) man who likely didn’t appreciate any bad publicity sullyng his estate is more than cause for suspicion that the inquest was not entirely above board.

The Vandy brothers, however, voiced no such misgivings, at least not publicly. Their only stated goal was to clear up “some doubts” regarding the cause of Edgar’s death. Although they did not at first believe in an afterlife, they hoped that a trance medium might be able to tap into some mind or another and uncover the truth via ESP.

George had once heard the Reverend Drayton Thomas lecture on proxy sittings whereby a person who knows little or nothing of a case “sits in” for a more involved person. (This should rule out the medium pulling key information from, or

otherwise being influenced by, the mind of the sitter.) So George wrote to the Rev. Thomas asking him to proxy sit with the medium Gladys Osbourne Leonard. This sitting was granted but it could not be scheduled for several weeks, and the brothers made other arrangements in the interim. Altogether, over a period of a year, nearly a dozen separate sessions were held with at least four mediums. (An additional sitting was held some 23 years later with yet another medium.)³

In the archives of psychic research one would be hard pressed to find any other case of a private citizen’s death being so thoroughly and repetitively investigated. The inordinate number of mediums and sittings makes for a complex case that can be difficult to grasp in its entirety. For our purposes, we’ll consider all the evidence as coming from one “super séance” and present only key statements therefrom. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the repetition of many descriptions and ideas among the various mediums makes an excellent counter to those who claim that a medium’s correct statements are simply lucky guesses. Those who strongly resist the idea of a spirit world may be able to credit one correct statement to fortune, but when three or more mediums all come up with the same information, only the most desperate überskeptic will dare claim luck or coincidence.

Of course, some would claim collusion. This is why the Vandy brothers went to such lengths to conceal their identities. Each initial appointment was made under a false name by mail from a different address. They never attended sessions together and they did not look at all alike. There was no normal way in which any medium could have known the identity of either Harold or George. They even hired different note

³ In order of consultation, the mediums were: Miss Frances Campbell, Mrs. Gladys Osbourne Leonard, Mrs. Mason, Miss Naomi Bacon, and Mrs. Bertha Harris.

takers to accompany them to each new medium. Furthermore, during the sessions, they were most reticent to answer the medium's requests for confirmation of her statements.

Making the extent of the case even more exceptional is the underlying skepticism of the brothers. Although deeply desirous of information, they persisted in assuming that recognized facts were gleaned via telepathy from the minds of the living and unrecognized statements were false until proven true. Ultimately, though, they seemed to accept that some part of their brother Edgar had survived the murky water.

Each medium consulted seemed to make contact with the spirit of Edgar Vandy. Out of all the hundreds of statements made by the various mediums, a few of those demonstrating paranormal knowledge appear below. Each statement by a medium (or her control, or a contact) is followed by the relevant facts.

Statement: (As the medium points to her front teeth) *He is showing me a little gap in his mouth as if a tooth were missing. Now he shows me an old scar and says 'That's my identification mark!'* [Sitter: "Where is the scar?"] *On his face.*

Facts: The cutting edge of one of Edgar's upper teeth had broken off, leaving a small gap between that and the corresponding lower tooth. He also had a large scar on the right side of his forehead, obtained by being thrown from a trap as a child. George had heard him make the remark, "This scar will always identify me."

Statement: *Now he is showing me a cigarette case, and that's funny, because he did not smoke.* [Sitter: "I don't think he had a cigarette case."] *He tells me where to find it—in his room—it seems to be at the end of a passage—there's a chest of drawers near the window. In one of the drawers you will find his things carefully folded*

up. I think you will find it there. [Sitter: "He didn't have a cigarette case."] *Put it down and check it up.*

Facts: True, Edgar did not smoke.⁴ The evening after the sitting Harold and George looked in the chest of drawers (which was near a window) and found Edgar's underwear carefully folded as described. They did not find a cigarette case, but in a corner at the bottom there was a new aluminum soap box. This, when held in the hand as shown by the medium, looked exactly like a metal cigarette case.

Statement: *He had a watch.* [Sitter: "No."] *He had a watch that wouldn't go.*

Facts: "I found afterwards that he had a wrist watch." —George Vandy

Statement: *This young man had a lot of papers that he kept in a kind of flat book form... there was quite a pile of them. But there was one of them that had both writing and drawings in it that he had done ... some of them had brown, and some it looks almost like black covers on them.*

Facts: These notebooks were unknown to the brothers until George found them while clearing out a storeroom more than 30 years later. All had black stiff covers except one, which had brown.

Statement: *Now he's showing me a tennis racquet. He is holding it up like this (holding her two hands diagonally), and that's strange, because he didn't play tennis. He doesn't look like a fellow who would play tennis.* [Sitter: "I don't understand the racquet. He didn't play tennis."] *Make a note of it and check it up.*

Facts: Edgar did not play tennis or possess a racquet. When the incident was mentioned to the sister she related that a few weeks previously she had a spare exposure on a spool of film and she used it to take a photograph of Edgar in the garden. It was a bright sunny

⁴ In that era, the odds were that the young man *did* smoke cigarettes.

day and he was dressed in tennis shirt, trousers, and shoes. To complete the picture, his sister fetched her racquet and asked him to pose with it. He joked about it and said the picture would delude people into thinking he was a player.

Statement: *Your other brother makes short journeys in his work. I get the letter "H". He is wearing something belonging to your brother who has passed over. [Sitter: "I don't think that is right. What is it?"] I think it is an article of clothing. [Sitter: "I'm sure that's not right."] He's persistent about it. Check it up.*

Facts: "One morning after Edgar's death, Harold took one of Edgar's hats by mistake. He did not return it but left it at the office with no intention of wearing it. On the day of this sitting his own hat was uncomfortable, so in the afternoon, almost involuntarily, he took Edgar's hat off the peg in his office and wore it. He was wearing it at the time the sitting took place. I knew nothing of this until I discussed the incident with Harold after the sitting." —George Vandy

Statement: *Do you know why he was interested in wireless [radio]? He seems very interested in it. In fact he keeps using wireless terms; he calls this a transmission. He is showing me the letters B.B.C.*

Facts: Edgar was keenly interested in wireless and had an expert knowledge of the subject. In the early days of the industry he ran a small manufacturing business. He and George were founding shareholders in the original British Broadcasting Company.

Statement: *This is a fairly big thing he is trying to show me, and has a wooden board, and he presses something, and I get something rolling forward and then a click, click, click, that is the thing he is trying to tell me about. Do you know he is not trying to write up something, but he is showing me a lot of letters : A, B, C, D, etc., and he shuffles them about a bit with his hands, and then he shows me a funny thing just like a thin line, and*

then an arm comes up and projects about half-a-dozen letters.

Facts: The Lectroline was about 6-feet square with a large wooden drawing board. It was started by pushing a button and controlled with rolls of paper tape. It made loud clicking sounds as it worked. Few, if any, other machines of the time would fit the description given.

Statement: *Would lithography or something of that work come into it? He says lithography or something to do with printing and I think he was clever in something he was helping to do. There were more machines, but he did a particular thing, and I do not know whether photography comes into it as well, but he is trying to show me plates or something. It seems to be very fine work, but in the actual room he is in I do not get many machines, but one special machine. In other parts of the building there are more, but he had a special thing.*

Facts: The primary output of the machine was lithographic plates. "The last attachment Edgar made for the Lectroline was a device for ruling very fine lines. In order to test how fine and close together he could draw the lines he used an old photographic negative and replaced the pen by a razor edge he specially made. In an adjoining room of the premises are seven copper-plate printing presses and an engraving machine." —Harold Vandy

Statement: *May I ask a question? Have I given his initials all right? [Sitter did not respond.] There is a 'D' in it - Ed. - Ed. - Ed - gar or Ed - ward. - Edgar.*

Facts: Which is, of course, correct.

An important counter to the idea that all was done by reading the minds of the living should be noted here. One brother, Harold, was in the real estate business and totally ignorant of the operations of Edgar's inventions; the second brother, George, was an engineer who was gen-

erally familiar with the machines; Edgar's assistant, John Burke, also had one sitting with one of the same mediums. Burke was an engineer who had worked on the equipment from the start. If the mediums were reading minds to gain their information, one would reasonably expect the more technical information to result from sittings with the more technically oriented and knowledgeable sitters. Exactly the opposite was the case. The séances with Harold produced the most attempts to describe machinery. The session with Burke, who was well versed in every aspect of the equipment, produced nothing technical whatsoever.

As for how Edgar died, many intriguing comments were passed along by the mediums. Some examples are:

- *He passed out through water, and yet it seems it need not have happened. I do not think it was a swimming bath. I am in a private kind of pool, and I am getting diving and things like that. Yes, I am out-of-doors, I am not enclosed — it is like a private swimming pool.*
- *He did not commit suicide, and he says he was not foolish, it was not his fault. He was after a definite object. There was somebody else. There was another person? His death was quite sudden.*
- *Your brother is talking a little as if he were afraid. That is curious, he is telling me that there is a woman who can tell you more about him (he is pointing to himself). This will puzzle you very much, as you cannot in any way connect it up. "I tell you she was frightened and went away," he says. When I ask him to explain more, he just nods. "That is right, it was to do with my passing over, but no one knew she was there."*
- *It is something about having to get his clothes. He had taken some of his clothing off. He gives me exactly the condition he was in, he was ill for only two or three minutes before he passed out, dazed, I get a quick drop. Even in the time he took to fall, the whole mind seemed to be upon his clothes. Your brother was very shy by nature.*
- *It was not his fault, he says "It was not my fault." There was a funny feeling in his head, a woolly head, muddled, I feel ; he gives me that feeling purposely after what you said — it was something he felt before, while, and even now, when he thinks of his passing.*
- *He certainly had a blow, and I am getting as though he were semi-conscious when he was in the water. From what I see of the conditions it is as though it were strange that he was drowned. I feel that he can tell me more than he will tell me, but he might implicate someone else. That is what I feel, and he does not want to give it.*
- *It seems to be something which happened under very unusual conditions, as far as he is trying to show me. He seems to be very unwilling to assist me just now.*
- *Is it right that you cannot get accurate information as to what happened, and that they did not tell you, and there is something being hushed up, because he is saying "I do not think you will be able to prove it on earth. It is something which was done and I do not know whether you will really get the truth about it."*
- *If this other person who was with him had not been cowardly, it would not have happened. This other man knows about it and will not say. I do not know if he was frightened and got out of the way and left him, because he is asking me to tell you that.*
- *I am not sure if someone was diving at the time. There was a diving board and whether someone knocked him or not I do not know, because he remembers going under and feeling a distinct blow on the head. He could not come up, as he apparently lost consciousness under water. This water should have been transparent, and it is very extraordinary nobody saw that, but he distinctly said there was another man there at the same time who should have known he was hurt.*

And so, the death of Edgar Vandy seems destined to remain mysterious. One of the mediums opined: "I do not think he is capable yet to

give the evidence that I wanted him to." But was he incapable or unwilling?



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For Further Information

"The Case of Edgar Vandy," by Kathleen Gay, *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. 39, March 1957, pages 2-61.

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"The Case of Edgar Vandy: Defending the Evidence," by Montague Keen, *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. 66, October 2002, pages 247-259.