

The Return of Mary Roff

— Case #45 —

Teenage girls are the focal point of many strange stories. What makes this tale really weird is that it involves two girls, both teenagers, who were born 12 years apart.¹

Although she was often a loved and loving child, from the time she was six-months old Mary Roff had been afflicted with seizures that gradually increased in violence. As she grew into a young woman, Mary started hearing voices and began to complain of a “lump of pain” in her head. To relieve her headaches, she would repeatedly draw out her blood with leeches. Whatever was causing her agonies seemed also to bestow psychic powers, as it was claimed that she could read sealed envelopes and closed books while tightly blindfolded. She became known throughout her hometown of Watseka, Illinois, and her alleged powers are said to have been carefully investigated by prominent citizens, including newspaper editors and clergymen.

Mary’s special talents could not save her, however. After slicing her arm in an apparent suicide attempt, she was committed to a mental hospital, where she died on the afternoon of July 5, 1865, at the age of 18.

Some 12 years later, another girl named Mary, living at the other end of the same town, began showing similar symptoms. There were two main differences between the Marys. For one thing, this second girl was named Mary Lurancy Venum, and she was known as Lurancy or simply “Rancy.” For another, Lurancy had seemed perfectly healthy until she was nearly 14. Then one day, July 11th, 1877, to be exact, Lurancy had some sort of seizure and lost consciousness for five hours. A similar episode occurred the following day, except that the seemingly unconscious girl began speaking of seeing dead people. This sort of thing happened several times daily for the ensuing six months, leading many friends and family members to suggest commitment to an asylum. No doubt these suggestions would have been followed, were it not for the interference of Mary Roff’s father.

Since the death of his daughter, Mr. Asa Roff had sat with a couple of mediums, had received material he thought came from his daughter, and had come to believe in the existence of a spirit world. Furthermore, he suspected that sending his daughter to an asylum had been a mistake. When he heard of the tribulations of Lurancy, Roff was concerned that the same mistake might be repeated. So, he contacted the Venum family – with whom he was distantly acquainted – and persuaded them to allow a friend to try and assist the girl.

Roff got considerably more than he bargained for. The friend was Dr. E.W. Stevens of Janesville, Wisconsin, who was skilled in hypnotism. Stevens traveled to the Venum home in Watseka and Roff introduced him to Lurancy in the presence of her family. Much of what we know about this case comes from material published later by Stevens, although others also did follow-up investigations.

When Stevens first saw Lurancy she was sitting in a chair with the posture of an old hag. He drew-up a chair and she savagely warned him not to come nearer. She identified herself as a woman named Katrina Hogan and she was reticent and sullen, but she said she would talk to the doctor because he was spiritual and would understand her. Then, suddenly, that personality was gone and she claimed to be a young man, named Willie Canning, who had recently run away from home, gotten into trouble, and lost his life. Finally, Stevens managed to induce a hypnotic trance and “was soon in full and free communication with the sane and happy mind of Lurancy Venum herself.” She claimed that she had been influenced by evil spirits but that now there were angels around her and one of them wanted to come to her. On being asked if she knew who it was, she said: “Her name is Mary Roff.”

Mr. Roff, although surprised, naturally thought that was a great idea. He encouraged Lurancy to let Mary come through, saying that his daughter was good and intelligent, and would be likely to help Lurancy since she used to suffer from

a similar affliction. Lurancy, after seeming to discuss the matter with her attending spirits, agreed that Mary would take the place of the former wild influences.

Mr. Roff, apparently thinking that Lurancy would now be in control with Mary's aid, said to her: "Have your mother bring you to my house, and Mary will be likely to come along, and a mutual benefit may be derived from our former experience with Mary." But, the next morning, the first day of February, 1878, the girl who awoke in Lurancy's bed and body claimed to actually *be* Mary Roff. She showed no recognition of the Vennum home or any of the family members. She just wanted to go home "to see her pa and ma and her brothers."

The next day, there was no change; nor the day after that. Mrs. Roff and her daughter, Mrs. Minerva Alter (Mary's mother and sister) came to see the girl at the Vennum home. As they came in sight, far down the street, "Mary"² spied them from a window and exclaimed, "There come my ma and sister Nervie!" – the name that Mary had called her sister in their childhood. For over a week, although she remained docile and polite, "Mary" constantly pleaded to go "home" and showed no signs of leaving Lurancy's body. Finally, on February 11th, it was agreed that she could go and live with the Roff family. This was not intended to be a permanent arrangement, though, as "Mary" said that she would only be allowed to remain in control until "some time in May."

And so, for the next 14 weeks, the Roffs were visited by a person who, except for her physical appearance and the lack of seizures and despondency, was in every way the daughter they had lost over 12 years previously. "Mary" immediately recognized every relative and family friend that Mary had known since infancy. She always called them by the names that Mary would have been familiar with; but she treated the Vennum family as total strangers.

The affirmations of her true being started on the way to the Roff home across town. As they traveled, they passed by the house where they had been living when Mary died. "Mary" demanded to know why they were not returning there and they had to explain that they had moved a few years previously.

She proved herself familiar with hundreds of incidents, both major and trifling, that had occurred in her previous life; sometimes spontaneously and sometimes in response to careful questioning. She knew what articles of clothing belonged to Mary and which ones Mary had made. She knew exactly where her brother was scarred when a stovepipe fell on him. When asked if she remembered a certain dog, she immediately pointed out the precise location in her sister's home where it had died. Never did any statement, or way of talking, or gesture give the slightest hint that she was not who she claimed to be.

"Mary" was thoroughly familiar with the horrid "treatments" that Mary was subjected to in attempts to cure her supposed insanity. She remembered cutting her arm, but when she started to pull up her sleeve to show the scar, she suddenly stopped and said, "Oh, this is not the arm; that one is in the ground." She then spoke of watching her own funeral and of sending messages to her father during his séances and she gave the exact times and locations of those sessions and correctly repeated the messages transmitted.

And then, around 10 o'clock on the night of the 20th of May, "Mary" came down from her sleeping quarters and lay down with Mr. and Mrs. Roff, hugged and kissed them and wept, saying that she must leave them again. The next morning, after bidding goodbye to her friends and neighbors, "Mary" was driven by the Roffs back to the Vennum home. By the time they arrived, Lurancy was back in control of her own body, where she remained, whole and healthy, until her death in the late 1940s.

For Further Information See:

Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death by F.W.H. Myers, 1903 revised 1961, pages 66-72.
A Critical Examination of the Belief in a Life After Death by C.J. Ducasse, Chapter 17. Available online at <http://www.survivalafterdeath.org/books/ducasse/critical/17.htm>



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¹ The case was first published in 1879 as “The Watseka Wonder” in the *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, and published in pamphlet form in 1887 titled *The Watseka Wonder: A Narrative of Startling Phenomena Occurring in the Case of Mary Lurancy Vennum*, by E. W. Stevens. Additional evidence was obtained by Dr. Hodgson in personal interviews with some of the chief witnesses and printed in the same journal in December 1890. The editor of the journal, said by F.W.H. Myers to be well known as a skillful and scrupulously honest investigator, endorsed Stevens and claimed that great pains were taken before and during publication to “obtain full corroboration of the astounding facts from unimpeachable and competent witnesses.”

² To minimize confusion, the name Mary (printed plainly) indicates the original Mary Roff and the name “Mary” (in quote marks) indicates the apparently possessed Lurancy Vennum.