

The Unforgotten Coin

— Case 68 —

"I confess that some of these experiences are so startling that if they had not come within my own vision and hearing, being myself fully acquainted with the details of the test conditions imposed, I should be strongly attempted to doubt them." So wrote Dr. Isaac K. Funk in the preface of his 1904 book, *The Widow's Mite and Other Psychic Phenomena*, published by his company, Funk & Wagnalls, which is known for producing *The Standard Dictionary*.

Sometime during 1894, Funk borrowed a valuable ancient Roman coin known as the "Widow's Mite"¹ from Professor Charles E. West, the principal of a school for ladies in Brooklyn Heights, New York, to illustrate it in his dictionary. Some years earlier, Henry Ward Beecher, a mutual friend, had told Funk about the coin and introduced him to professor West.



As Funk was to later recall, he gave the coin to his brother, Benjamin, the company's business manager, and asked him to return it to West after the photographic plate was made. Benjamin then gave the coin, along with another coin, both in a sealed envelope, to H. L. Raymond, head cashier of the company. Raymond placed the envelope in the drawer of a large combination safe, where it would remain forgotten for some nine years.

It was in February of 1903 that Funk was told about an apparently gifted medium in Brooklyn, NY. She, her son, her brother, and a few close friends were holding a kind of "prayer meeting" or "family reunion" every Wednesday night. Funk arranged to sit with the group. As the medium was strictly an amateur and wanted no publicity, Funk did not give her name in the book. He described

her, however, as a 68-year-old woman "of little school education, refined in manners." She had three spirit controls – a deceased son named Amos; a daughter of her brother named Mamie, who died at age 7; and George Carroll, the deceased friend of a member of the circle.

As a guest of the private circle, Funk did not feel he could impose test conditions upon the medium. "It was all 'upon honor,'" he wrote. "After considerable investigation, however, and fuller acquaintance with the family, I am morally certain that this confidence in the integrity of the medium and family at the time of this mite incident was not misplaced."

The medium was of the trance, direct-voice type, *i.e.*, the voices did not come from her vocal cords but from somewhere near her through a floating trumpet. "The voices are of a great variety," Funk observed. "I counted in a single evening as many as twenty – some apparently the voices of children, and others of middle-aged persons and old men and women ... Each voice maintains its individuality during the evening and from one evening to another."

On Funk's third visit to the medium, George Carroll spoke up in "his usual strong masculine voice" and said: "Has any one here got anything that belonged to Mr. Beecher?" There was no reply, but Funk, having known Beecher, who had died several years earlier, asked for clarification. George Carroll bellowed: "... I am told by John Rakestraw, that Mr. Beecher, who is not present, is concerned about an ancient coin, the 'Widow's Mite.' This coin is out of its place and should be returned. It has long been away, and Mr. Beecher wishes it returned, and he looks to *you*, doctor, to return it."

Funk recalled borrowing the coin, but told George that it had been promptly returned. "This one has *not* been returned," George replied. Funk pressed for more information. "I don't know

where it is," George replied. "I am simply impressed that it is in a large iron safe in a drawer under a lot of papers and has been lost sight of for years, and that you can find it, and Mr. Beecher wishes you to find it."

At his office the next day, Funk questioned his brother about the coin. Benjamin said that he was sure he had returned it to the owner. Funk then questioned, Raymond, the head cashier, who also said it had been returned to the owner. Funk then directed Raymond to go to both of the company's iron safes and search for it. About 20 minutes later, Raymond returned with an envelope holding two widow's mites – one very dark and one light. He explained that it was found in a little drawer in the safe under a lot of papers.

Upon examining the two coins, Funk concluded that the lighter one was the genuine widow's mite. It was the one displayed in the dictionary. On the following Wednesday, Funk attended the Brooklyn circle. Toward the end of the session, George Carroll began talking and Funk informed him that he had found the widow's mite, in fact, had found two of them. He asked George if he knew which was the genuine coin. "The black one," George replied without hesitation. Later, Funk checked with the Philadelphia mint and found that George was right and he was wrong. In fact, they had used the wrong coin in the dictionary illustration. The light one was simply a replica.

As a test of George or the medium, Funk then asked George if he knew from whom he had borrowed the coin. George responded that it was Mr. Beecher's friend, but he could not give a name. George reported, however, that he was being shown a picture of a college, which he identified as a lady's college in Brooklyn Heights. Funk also asked George to whom the coin should be returned. "I can not tell you; I do not know; for some reason Mr. Beecher does not tell," George said.

At a circle with another medium the following week, Funk heard from Beecher through the medium's spirit control. "I was told by the control that Mr. Beecher said that he was not concerned about the return of the coin," Funk continued. "What he was concerned about was to give me a test that would prove the certainty of communication between the two worlds, and since that has been accomplished in my finding the coin, he cared nothing further about it."

As West had died, the coin was returned to his son.

Funk ruled out fraud, coincidence, and telepathy and concluded that spirit communication was the most likely explanation. Dr. James H. Hyslop, a professor of logic and ethics at Columbia University accompanied Funk to one sitting with the Brooklyn medium and agreed with him that she was genuine. Hyslop read Funk's full report and wrote, "I see no way to impeach it positively."

Discussion

The strength of this case lies in the reputations of its reporter and the researchers involved and in the revelation of facts not known to anyone involved in the sittings, not consciously known by anyone living, and in contradiction to everyone's expectations. The initiator's concern with proving the communication from spirit but not caring about the actual disposition of the coin, is both fitting and inexplicable by any other reasonable scenario.

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¹ "Mite" is the English term for the Greek "lepton" which means "small." The mite referred to here was a Judean coin worth two of the smallest Roman coins during the time of Jesus. According to the book of Mark, one of Jesus' parables concerned the relative value of a widow's donation of two mites as compared to the larger sums given by the rich.