

POLIDORO AND RINALDI: NO MATCH FOR  
PALLADINO AND THE FEILDING REPORT

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## ABSTRACT

Polidoro and Rinaldi (1998) propose that a combination of Eusapia Palladino's ability to elude hand and foot controls and the gullibility of Feilding, Baggally and Carrington are sufficient to account for the phenomena witnessed during the Naples séances and described in the Feilding Report. The present paper challenges this proposition, both on the grounds of evidence presented in the Report and neglected by Polidoro and Rinaldi, and the wider knowledge of Palladino's genuine gifts and fraudulent lapses detailed by numerous leading European investigators.

## INTRODUCTION

At the outset of their 1998 paper charging Feilding, Baggally and Carrington (F/B/C) with incompetence during the séances with Eusapia Palladino in Rome, Polidoro and Rinaldi (P/R) make reference to Richard Wiseman, and state that "what has clearly emerged from [his] work is that the three investigators were simply no match for Eusapia" (Polidoro & Rinaldi, 1998). Not so. In the papers referenced by P/R, Richard Wiseman's thesis was that F/B/C were no match for Palladino's alleged *accomplice*—a thesis which in any case was rejected by Mary Rose Barrington and myself (Barrington, 1992, 1993; Fontana, 1992, 1993) on the grounds that the notion of an accomplice during the séances was untenable.

This apart, let us examine the arguments P/R put forward in support of their belief that Palladino was able to deceive the investigators by the use of fraudulent strategies which the latter were too incompetent to guard against or to recognise. In what follows, the headings are those used by P/R, and all the quotations come from their article except where indicated otherwise.

## THE CREDENTIALS OF THE INVESTIGATORS

P/R give a lengthy quote from the Feilding Report (Feilding et al., 1909) in order to present the credentials of the three investigators, which they then dismiss with the slighting remark that the "high level of competence of the researchers in detecting trickery must have disappeared elsewhere". In fact, the descriptions given in the Feilding Report (the Report) of the investigators' competence is overmodest. Baggally had been investigating physical mediumship for 35 years, during which time he had remained unconvinced that he had ever witnessed genuine phenomena (Carrington, 1909). Moreover, as an accomplished practising conjuror, he could perform most of the "tricks and devices resorted to by fraudulent mediums". Feilding, the Hon. Secretary of the SPR, was a constant investigator of cases of all kinds, and apart from possibilities during his earlier sittings with Palladino in Paris, had in ten years never seen any physical phenomena which he considered conclusively proven. Dedicating one of his best-known books to him, Carrington wrote that his

“acumen, critical judgement, and impartiality make him, in my estimation, an ideal psychical researcher” (Carrington, 1918).

Like his fellow investigators, Carrington had also been engaged in investigating physical phenomena for many years, travelling hundreds of miles and sitting with scores of mediums, only to be disappointed on every occasion. He had an extensive knowledge of conjuring, and his *Physical Phenomena of Spiritualism* (1907) devoted some 400 pages to the tricks of fraudulent mediums and to their powers of deception. Reviewing the book for the *SPR Proceedings*, Count Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo (who incidentally contributes a critical review of an account of Palladino’s sittings in Paris to the very issue of the *Proceedings* containing the Feilding Report) wrote:—

Mr. Carrington seems to have quite an extraordinary knowledge of conjuring and pseudo-mediumistic tricks, and . . . [in his book] . . . opens up in this direction such vistas, that the uninitiated reader’s breath is simply taken away . . . As an exposé of conjuring and ‘mediumistic’ devices he in my opinion stands unsurpassed, and there can be no doubt that his volume has dealt professional mediumship a most sensible, I should perhaps say a crushing, blow.

In the light of such evidence, P/R’s charge of incompetence against F/B/C appears ill-informed and presumptuous to say the least. It is all too easy to criticise investigators who are no longer here to defend themselves, particularly if one appears unfamiliar with their credentials or indeed—as we shall see shortly—with much of what they have to say about their own work.

Having raised the name of Count Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo, it is interesting to note that P/R refer to his review article in the *Proceedings* containing the Feilding Report, and point out that the suggestions for controlling Palladino which he proposes are similar to their own. They forget to mention that Count P-P-S wrote his review before seeing the abstract of the Feilding Report, and that having seen it he added an additional paragraph to the review, in which he said (p. 589):—

The fact that such experts in the domain of conjuring [as F/B/C] should have been converted by what they saw to a belief in the genuineness of E.P.’s phenomena is eminently significant and satisfactory. I also heartily welcome their methods of investigation, and think the absence of imposing technical appliances more than compensated for by some of the results obtained. In view of the latter circumstances I confess I should be happy to see a similar course of action uniformly adopted in the future, even by scientific stars of the first magnitude

What of P/R’s other points?

#### THE INCIDENT OF THE CORD

Early in their paper, P/R draw our attention to an incident during Séance VIII when one of Palladino’s ankles became untied, and which they consider is an example of the investigators’ incompetence. Before the séance, “each foot had been tied with a separate cord to the legs of the experimenters at the right and left side of the table”, but during the séance “the experimenters saw one cord thrown on the table: the other end was still fastened to the experimenter’s chair, but Eusapia’s left foot was free”.

Commenting on this, P/R argue:—

This episode could at least have given the experimenters a chance to admit . . . the knots were not all that difficult to untie surreptitiously, that the cord was maybe not

best suited for the purpose, that the hands of the medium were not being carefully controlled, that the light was insufficient for observing her movements, and . . . that all of them . . . had been unable to prevent Eusapia from freeing herself when she wished to do so. Nothing of this kind ever passed through their minds.

There are so many objections to these comments that it is difficult to know where to begin. Firstly, P/R are wrong when they say that the cords were tied to the "experimenters' chairs". The Report makes it clear they were tied to the *controllers'* chairs. At the time of the incident Palladino was controlled by Feilding and by *Ryan*, who was not an experimenter but one of the three extra sitters at the séance. The point is much more than an academic one. As Carrington and Baggally were not controlling at this point in the sitting, they were in fact free to move around the room at will. The relevant diagram in the Report clearly shows that at the time of the cord incident they were standing to either side of Palladino, and able to see what took place between her chair and the chairs of Feilding and Ryan. In addition, the diagram shows that while Palladino was sitting at the head of the table, Feilding and Ryan were sitting at the sides, making it particularly difficult for her to bend down in order to reach and untie undetected either of her ankles from their chairs.

P/R would have us suppose that, in spite of the positions taken up by Baggally and Carrington, the experimenters should have admitted they were "unable to prevent Eusapia freeing herself when she wished to do so". Inaccurate suppositions such as this have no place in a scientific journal, even one concerned with a subject as slippery as psychical research. The above in itself should be sufficient to set aside P/R's objections to the cord incident, but their other points concerning it are equally tenuous. Let me list them, commenting on each in turn.

*The knots holding Palladino's ankle were not all that difficult to untie.* In support of their suggestion, P/R mention that Baggally (described in the Report as "an expert knot-tier"), who had tied the knots, apparently took only about two minutes to untie the corresponding cord around Palladino's other ankle. They omit to tell us however that the Report specifically states the knots were reef knots, and that there were four of them (p.504). Even had Palladino freed her left hand from Ryan's control, are we to suppose she untied four reef knots from her ankle with this hand, under the gaze moreover of two observers on either side and two standing behind her? Feilding makes precisely this point himself in the Report (p. 500):—

Even supposing that the medium had freed her hand from Ryan, unperceived and unremembered by him, it is to me inconceivable that she could have stooped down and untied the knots with her left hand between the time I verified the fastenings and the appearance of the rope.

*The cord was maybe unsuited for its purpose.* Not only does Feilding tell us that "the rope was of such a kind as to be difficult to untie" (p.500), but Carrington reports that "the rope used throughout for tying the medium was one I had brought with me specially for that purpose. It was very soft and pliable, and a most difficult rope to untie, as the knots, when tied, sank deeply into the cord" (p.500). As an expert on conjuring, Carrington can surely be given credit for knowing what he was talking about.

*The hands of the medium were not being properly controlled.* P/R fail to

mention that Feilding states just prior to the incident that "the medium's right hand was resting quite quietly on my left, and I know it is the whole hand". At the same time, Ryan reports that "She was grasping firmly the forefinger of my left hand with the whole of her left hand, fingers and thumb, my right hand firmly pressed on her knee. Her left foot grinding on my right foot" (p.499). P/R might argue that ideally Palladino's wrists should have been tied to those of the controllers, but the controllers also had the benefit (p.500) of "a light which was amply sufficient to follow any action of this kind" (i.e. of any action to free her hand from Ryan's control and bend down to undo Baggally's four reef knots). Incidentally, should Ryan's competence be suspect, it is relevant to point out that he is described by Feilding as "a gentleman with medical training who . . . proved to be a particularly painstaking and shrewd observer" (p.484), and by Baggally as "a careful observer not easily deceived" (p.501).

*The light was insufficient for observing her movements.* I have already quoted Feilding to the effect that "the light was amply sufficient" to observe Palladino, but we can be more precise than this. Of the six levels of light available to the investigators during the séances, the cord incident was observed in Light III. The Report indicates that the strength of this level of light "can be judged from the distance (6 to 8 feet)" at which Carrington was able to see the movement of one of the objects during the séance in question. In addition, we are assured that this degree of light allowed the investigators to see "the medium's hands . . . perfectly visible, on the table" (p.485). In view of these clear descriptions P/R cannot, with any credibility, claim the light was insufficient to see Palladino free her left hand from Ryan's control, stoop down and untie with her left hand four reef knots in soft cord around her left ankle under the gaze of four observers, none of whom, judging from the diagram on p.495, was more than three or four feet away.

#### THE GENERAL CONDITIONS OF THE SÉANCES

P/R emphasise that the conditions under which the séances were held were "dictated to the experimenters . . . even the curtains and the table were [Palladino's] own". The word 'dictate' is misleading. The Report states clearly (p.321) that:-

Eusapia desired us to procure a pair of black curtains and a small table.

Alternatively she offered to provide them herself. We accepted her offer expressly with a view to seeing if she would provide anything in the way of trick apparatus.

Hardly the stuff of dictation. The above indicates that not only were the investigators free to provide their own curtains and table if they wished, their decision to allow Palladino to do so was the result of a clear and sensible decision.

In addition, the small objects inside the cabinet were all purchased by F/B/C themselves. Careful examination of the table was allowed, and together with the curtains and the props it remained in Feilding's room between sittings (what conjuror would allow his or her artefacts to be treated similarly?). P/R might argue that it was the lightness of the table (ten and a half pounds) and its consequent manoeuvrability that were suspicious rather than any trick features in its construction, but this is something to which I return at relevant

points below. And it is worth pointing out that far from Palladino always calling the shots at her sittings, the table in the successful séances with Professor Richet on the Ile Ribaud (which Myers, Sir Oliver Lodge, Baron Schrenck-Notzing and the Sidgwicks all attended) was constructed by Richet, was 39 inches square, and weighed 48 pounds.

P/R also inform us that the picture facing p.321 of the Report shows that Palladino sat immediately in front of the cabinet, "with the back of her chair touching the curtains". In fact the exact position of the back of Palladino's chair is unclear from the photograph, but in any case the point is irrelevant. The picture, together with the others in the Report, was clearly posed rather than taken during the séances, and the Report is explicit that "the back of her chair [was] *a foot or a foot and a half* [my italics] distant from [the curtains]" (p.323). In e.g. Séance V, when the chair is moved backwards, the Report informs us of the fact.

### THE LIGHTS

I have already dealt with the adequacy of the lighting during the cord incident.

After the changes to the lighting introduced before Séance III, a commutator enabled the six levels of lighting to go from "the ordinary light of the room down to a rather faint glow" (p.375). P/R describe this lowest level as "almost pitch black". In fact Lights V and VI were rarely used, and complete darkness employed even less frequently. Thus most of the investigations were carried out in Lights I to IV. It is also worth noting that although P/R appear to imply that Palladino laid down prior conditions on how the lighting should be provided ("she went so far as to dictate how this should be: and the experimenters again satisfied her requests. . . . They prepared, thus, an elaborate system of electric lights . . ."), the Report makes no mention of her having given any instructions as to how the lights should be set up.

P/R suggest that dim lighting suited Palladino better than darkness because "if she was going to move an object, she needed enough light to allow the sitters to see the object move, but not enough that they could understand how the movement was being accomplished". They also insist that in dim light the investigators "have already enough trouble trying to see what phenomena are happening that their attention is obviously distracted from the controls, here mainly of a tactile kind, of hands and feet". They go on to tell us that "it is very useful [for Palladino] to continually see the experimenters, to know where they are and what they are doing and, in such a way, prevent any unpleasant surprises". There are so many unsubstantiated assumptions here that it is hard to take the arguments seriously. On the one hand we are told the light should be enough to allow the investigators to see objects move, but on the other that it should not allow them to see how the movements are made. Are we seriously to believe, without supporting evidence, that in a light sufficient to see objects move, F/B/C would be unable to see Palladino's feet or hands causing these movements—in spite of the fact that they were sitting or standing no more than two or three feet away?

Are we also to believe that experienced investigators would be so distracted by attempts to see what is happening that they would forget their tactile

controls? Are we further to believe that all this takes place in a light which is nevertheless strong enough to allow Palladino "to continually see the experimenters, to know where they are and what they are doing"? Such arguments come perilously close to insulting the intelligence not only of F/B/C but also of the reader.

#### THE SKIRT

P/R inform us that the picture facing p.321 of the Report shows Palladino's skirt to be touching the curtains. I have already mentioned that the illustrations in the Report were clearly not taken during the séances themselves—but even if we are interested in the positioning of Palladino's skirt as shown in the picture, P/R are incorrect in saying it is touching the curtains of the cabinet, as readers can verify for themselves. I agree with P/R that from the standpoint of psychical research it would have been better had women of Palladino's era not worn such full skirts, but it is worth mentioning that even dressing mediums in purpose-made garments (as e.g. with Helen Duncan) or reducing them to nudity (as e.g. with Eva Carrière) failed to silence the objections of critics.

#### THE TABLE

In view of the lightness of the table, P/R tell us that "By slightly opening her legs [Palladino] could very easily seize the table and move it about or raise it a few inches from the ground". Readers might be excused from wondering whether P/R have really studied the Feilding Report. Three of the best levitations took place in Séance IX with maximum illumination (Light I, the ordinary light of the room), and Baggally assures us specifically that at the time Palladino's

... hands [were] plainly visible and in such a position that she could not make use of them for raising the table, and at the same time a space was seen by C [Carrington] and myself between the table legs and the dress of the medium on either side of her ... I am therefore convinced that Eusapia did not make use of her hands, or her feet, or of any part of her body; neither did she resort to any mechanical means, nor was she assisted by a confederate. [p.563]

Space allows only one other relevant example, Séance V, where a complete levitation occurs just after Carrington, at the request of Palladino, has gone under the table and held "both the medium's ankles in my two hands and can see there is about three inches between her skirt and the table leg on either side". Illumination was Light II at the time (p.425).

It is difficult to know what more the investigators could say or do to dispose of the idea that all the levitations witnessed by them were due to Palladino's ability to "seize the table and move it about or raise it a few inches from the ground". The Report also tells us that in complete levitations "the table generally went up horizontally" and to a height "seldom less than 6 in. off the ground, and frequently a foot or more" (p.347), and that "notwithstanding that every kind of foot control was tried, such as encircling her feet separately between our feet and encircling the legs of the table with our legs, nothing seemed to impede them" (p.348). (See also the information in the Report on pp.331-332.)

## THE METHODS USED BY EUSAPIA TO PRODUCE THE PHENOMENA

In spite of their use of the plural, the only method P/R describe under this heading is Palladino's alleged ability to insert a foot under one of the table legs, then press down on the table top in order to raise the other legs. My quote from Baggally in the last section disposes of the notion that this accounts for all the table levitations witnessed during the Naples sittings. But even the one example of a levitation which P/R quote in support of their notion is no help to their cause. They allege it shows Palladino may have used her left foot to lift the table leg. Does it? Let's look more closely.

The quotation tells us that, at the time of the levitation, Palladino's left foot was in fact pressing on Carrington's right and her left knee was in contact with his right. P/R suggest that the "method we keep in mind" is that Palladino could control Carrington's foot "by touching his foot with her right foot or by having his foot on top of her empty boot". We can dispose of the first part of this suggestion by ascertaining the position of her right foot at the time. Feilding tells us—in text which P/R omit to quote—that "my right foot [was] touching her right foot". The second part of the suggestion is dismissed by the fact that Carrington makes clear Palladino's left foot was "pressing against" his right foot, and there was thus no question of having his foot "on top of an empty boot". In addition, P/R omit also to tell us that the Report makes clear Feilding's left hand was across Palladino's knees during the incident, thus making it less likely she could attempt foot substitution unnoticed. They also fail to tell us that the incident took place, like the levitation in Séance IX to which I have already referred, in *Light I (the ordinary light of the room)*.

## THE CONTROL OF HANDS AND FEET

There is no doubt that controls present the major headache for those researching physical phenomena (a headache compounded by armchair critics who believe they have dreamt up clever safeguards obtusely overlooked by experienced investigators). Even limited acquaintance with research in this difficult area demonstrates that, however much they may wish to do so, investigators cannot lay down all the laws. A similar inability to control all the research variables is accepted as a matter of course in other areas of human behaviour. No outsider can insist, for example, on the conditions under which writers, artists, musicians, athletes, craftsmen, healers, even lovers produce their best work. We know so little of the abilities and the individual differences concerned that the performers themselves have to be consulted on what is best for them.

Our knowledge of the appropriate conditions for mediumship is even more limited, but since the data produced are more controversial than in other research areas, it is natural that controls should figure particularly largely in our thinking. So, having explained that they preferred to use conditions familiar to Palladino in order not to impede the production of phenomena (p.322 of the Report), what do F/B/C have to say about the controls and their degree of authority over them?

If [Palladino] was in a good temper she would generally allow us to control her as we pleased, that is to hold the whole of her hands, to tie her hands and her feet or to

encircle her feet with ours . . . it was on the nights when she was in the best humour, and consequently when our precautions were most complete and the lights the strongest when the phenomena were most numerous. [When she was in a bad humour] and appeared to evade our control . . . the phenomena . . . were fewer and of small account. [p. 323]

Elsewhere in the Report we are told that it was "During the continuance of the brighter lights in which the séance generally opened . . . [that] . . . as a rule the levitation of the séance table took place" (p.324). It is surprising, to say the least, that P/R make no reference to the above quotations, particularly as they quote from an adjacent page (p.326) when discussing the presence or absence of adequate controls.

When referring to Palladino's well-known hand substitution trick (freeing one hand and using the other to keep contact with the hands of both controllers), P/R mention that the investigators "have to admit" that when Palladino was caught effecting hand-substitution in Séance III "the skill with which the substitution was performed was remarkable". P/R then imply that this suggests the investigators must have missed other occasions when hand-substitution took place, backing this up with the claim that when substitution was observed it was noticed only "by chance". The implication and the claim are both pure speculation, and by quoting selectively P/R fail to tell us that when substitution was observed in Séance III Carrington insists it was "perfectly clear" (p.391), while Feilding assures us Palladino was warned not do such a thing again "and during the rest of the séances apparently did not attempt it . . . except once in the 11th . . . and once possibly in the 4th" (p.396). P/R also neglect to mention that when substitution was attempted in Séance III "the light was not so dim as to prevent Carrington" from observing it (p.326), even though the light was Light VI, the lowest level of illumination employed.

P/R also fail to tell us that F/B/C point out that although substitutions could have taken place undetected at certain points in séances III, IV and X,

. . . the conclusions to which we have come regarding the character of Eusapia's phenomena are in no way affected by this admission. These conclusions were formed as a result of séances in which, on account of the degree of light and of the adequacy of control, substitution of hands was not possible and—unless our coincident sensations of both sight and sound were constantly hallucinatory—certainly did not take place, and of such séances the bulk of our series of experiments was composed . . . whereas in certain circumstances absolutely no reliance can be placed on the control of Eusapia and the phenomena obtained . . . in other conditions the control of her is not a matter of difficulty, nor can the phenomena observed therein be explained by any such method as substitution or release of hands or feet. [pp. 326–327]

Where control of feet was found to be inadequate, as in Séance III, F/B/C make this clear and discount the phenomena, though Feilding nevertheless feels it right to inform us that "never once, in the course of hundreds of phenomena, did we detect a single case of undoubted fraud . . . and though there were many phenomena which must be classed as non-evidential, there were in fact none which we should be justified in thinking to be probably spurious . . ." (p.397).

If P/R had wanted further details of the controls of hands and feet, they could have turned to Carrington (1909), a text they appear not to have

consulted and that gives more details of the Naples séances. Carrington devotes eight pages to a detailed account of just these matters. One of the passages most relevant to P/R's concern over possible fraud during the table levitations tells us (p. 167) that:—

We ascertained that her skirt was not touching the legs of the table by passing our hands between the table and the skirt; we frequently pressed heavily upon her two knees with our hands; we controlled her feet with ours, and on several occasions placed a night light under the table, to be better enabled to see her feet and legs. We tied her legs to the chair with rope; finally we got under the table and held her ankles in our hands. In spite of all these precautions, however, the table continued to rise up in the air without visible means of support.

#### EUSAPIA'S SAPIENT FOOT

Not content with suggesting that Palladino's left foot was responsible for table levitations, P/R go on to suggest it was used in other fraudulent ways. "Eusapia's secret weapon was precisely her left foot". They tell us that "it never crossed their [i.e. F/B/C's] minds that she could also move with it the objects in the cabinet behind her, or produce the bulges on the curtain behind her at the height of her head, or touch the experimenters on the face". The feat, we are assured, was possible even in a portly 54-year-old woman with a voluminous skirt because of an alleged "articulated hip" (whatever that means—I don't recognise the term as having medical significance: all hips are articulated). We are also informed that "It also happens that Eusapia lets her *feet* [my italics] come out of the curtains" to give the impression of "some kind of monster which they describe as like . . . a small head with a long neck".

What on earth are we to make of allegations of this kind? Firstly, as I have already pointed out, F/B/C inform us that the back of Palladino's chair was "a foot or a foot and a half" from the curtains. Even with her allegedly extraordinary left hip are we seriously expected to believe that Palladino could reach the necessary distance backwards to intrude her foot under the curtains and move the objects in the cabinet? Are we seriously expected to believe she could then raise it, still behind the curtains, to "the height of her head"? Are we seriously expected to believe that she could get her leg out from under the table and raise it high enough for her foot to "touch the experimenters on the face"?

Secondly, are we expected to believe that these feats, surely beyond the capabilities of contortionists half her age, could be performed under the observation of the investigators in actual physical contact with her on either side? And what of the light when Palladino was putting on this extraordinary performance? Let us take an example. Baggally tells us (p. 561) that:—

The light had been raised to No 1 . . . owing to the good light and my position I could distinctly see at the same moment her head in her hands, her body down to her feet, and the curtain which was close to me and not touching her . . . [The] curtain bulged strongly out about a foot and a half from the medium's head and level with it . . . No possibility of her being able to produce the movement by normal means.

If further evidence is needed, we are told that the incident took place "shortly after Feilding had carefully examined the curtain, gathered it together and placed it away from the medium" (p. 536). In a court of law, I presume a barrister would say that he rests his case.

#### WARNINGS FROM 'GURNEY' AND FROM 'MYERS'

It is not clear why P/R include this section, in which alleged communications from Gurney and Myers through the mediumship of Mrs Holland and containing warnings about Palladino's feet are quoted. P/R appear to think the warnings came from Mrs Holland herself, as a result of "papers" she had read "dealing with discussions being held at the time on Eusapia's phenomena". We are not told what these papers might have been, but a complete bibliography of Eusapia was published by Morselli in 1908 in his *Psicologia e Spiritismo*. Carrington's own review of the literature (Carrington, 1909) indicates that he was fully conversant with all the works concerned. Thus F/B/C were already familiar with any 'papers' which Mrs Holland might have seen, and had no need of her 'warnings'. The reason why they restricted themselves to the controls actually used, and the relationship of these controls to the production of phenomena, have already been fully discussed above.

If P/R entertain the possibility that the warnings concerned might actually have come from a discarnate Gurney and a discarnate Myers, it is relevant to point out that Gurney, who died in 1888, never sat with Palladino. Myers, who knew her work well, was convinced of genuine phenomena in the 1894 Ile Ribaud sittings with Professor Richet and Sir Oliver Lodge, convinced of fraud in the Cambridge sittings of 1895 with Dr Hodgson and the conjuror Maskelyne, and convinced of genuine phenomena at the Paris sitting of 1898, again with Professor Richet (Richet, 1923).

#### THE AMERICAN INCIDENTS

In dealing with the events surrounding Palladino's visit to America (10th November 1909 to 18th June 1910), P/R restrict themselves to second-hand source material, namely Hansel (1989). This is unfortunate, not only because Hansel is highly selective in the information he gives, but because his hostility to psychical research is well known. Had P/R wished to redress the balance and to go to original sources, they need have looked no further than Carrington (1918). If they had done so, they would have discovered that, with the exception of Séance XIV which I return to below, the first 26 American séances were relatively satisfactory, and some of them markedly so. At the very first of these Will Irwin, a well-known exposé of fraudulent mediums, reported in *The New York Times* (p.141) that during the table levitations:—

... the spectators on the edge of the circle could look under the table and see [Palladino's] feet and knees quiet and absolutely controlled... [During a complete levitation of a foot and a half] I stooped and watched her legs... I plainly saw her feet on the floor, and knees together and away from the table leg and all three of her nearest sitters holding her legs under the table.

And this "directly under the full light of a sixteen candle power electric lamp". Also impressed by Palladino was Howard Thurston, one of the leading magicians in America at the time, who is reported as saying of Palladino's table levitations "I am thoroughly convinced that the phenomena I saw were not due to fraud and were not performed by the aid of her feet, knees, or hands" (Fodor, 1933, p.271). Thurston even offered to give one thousand dollars to charity if it could be proved that Palladino could not levitate a table without trickery, but there were apparently no takers.

P/R refer to Carrington's becoming "an impresario" when he returned to America from Naples, organising Palladino's tour "for a very handsome cachet (some 125 dollars for a séance: quite a lot of money in those days)". The *OED* defines an impresario as an "organiser of public entertainments, especially manager of operatic or concert company". P/R thus not only brand Palladino as a "public entertainment", but effect a gross libel on Carrington, who makes it plain that he took her to America "in order that her phenomena might be studied by the scientific men of this country, as they had previously been studied by their confrères in Europe" (p.127), and that he himself made "no money" from the trip.

P/R then devote their attention respectively to Professor Munsterberg's apparent exposure of Palladino at Séance XIV, when his accomplice crept "noiselessly like a snail" into the cabinet and caught hold of her foot as it reached under the curtains, and to the alleged exposure at the April 24th séance at Columbia University, when Rinn and Payne, hiding under the chairs, apparently saw her use her foot to levitate the table and kick the curtains. (Incidentally, the Columbia sittings were not the end of Palladino's American tour as P/R tell us—she subsequently held unsuccessful séances with Professor Lord on 17th and 24th April, and with Professor Trowbridge and Maurice Samuels on 9th May). These supposed tricks have already been dealt with extensively above, and reasons given as to why they could not be used to explain relevant phenomena during the Naples séances. They also fail to explain much of what happened in America. For example (the quotes are extracts from some of the stenographic reports given in Carrington, 1918):—

*Séance VI.* Light No. 3. Complete levitation . . . of about eight inches. Both medium's hands off the table at least eight inches. Her feet and knees perfectly controlled and seen not to be in contact with the table . . . All feet, knees and hands are seen free from contact with the table. [p.153]

*Séance VIII.* Table rises at an angle of forty-five degrees and moves in every direction . . . One gentleman kneels on floor and holds Eusapia's legs and feet. Eusapia is at least two feet from table. Complete levitation about one foot from floor . . . Table continues to move in every direction. [pp.159-160]

*Séance X.* Tambourine goes back into cabinet. Then comes out again. Plays several times outside left curtain . . . Then withdraws into cabinet around left-hand curtain . . . All this time the table is tipping up and down. C. [says] I had a good profile view of the medium and could see a clear space between her body and the cabinet. [p.167]

*Séance XIII.* Complete [table] levitation. Mr. B. passes his hand between the medium and the table. Another sitter passes his hand between the legs of the table and the medium, and under them. [p.171]

*Séance XVI.* The tambourine sounded continually, and finally came out of the cabinet on the left side. It was struck in the air several times . . . Her hands were held by her controllers, and rested on her knees . . . the small table . . . seemed to float [out of the cabinet] raised fully two feet from the floor . . . When outside it stood up against the cabinet, still two feet from the floor, and four feet from Eusapia. All this time C. [Carrington] was under the table, holding Eusapia's feet. [p.181]

P/R may argue that we need to know more details of these American séances and the reliability of the individual witnesses and controls, but in that case we can ask in turn for more details of the reliability of Munsterberg's accomplice at Séance XIV, and indeed of that of Rinn (a friend of Houdini) and of Payne (a

Columbia University student). But there need be no quibbling about Palladino being caught in fraud from time to time, not only in America but elsewhere. There is no doubt at all that in blank sittings she frequently tried to help things out, and indeed was given to issuing warnings to investigators such as "Watch me! You must watch me all the time—or I'll cheat. John King [her supposed guide] makes me do it!". Cesare Lombroso, regarded as one of the scientific geniuses of the 19th Century, who first sat with her in 1891 and first wrote of her in the *Annales des Sciences Psychiques* in 1892, reports these exact words, and further comments that:—

Many are the crafty tricks she plays, both in the state of trance (unconscious) and out of it—for example, freeing one of her hands held by the controllers, for the sake of moving objects near her; making touches; slowly lifting the legs of the table by means of one of her knees and one of her feet . . .

Very much the same fraudulent methods as those referred to by P/R over a century later! Her tendency to cheat unless controlled was commented upon over and over again by other investigators, and was very well known to F/B/C (as P/R freely acknowledge). But like other investigators, Lombroso was in no doubt that Palladino was genuine on many other occasions. He reports observing, in full light, not only the range of phenomena chronicled by F/B/C but materializations, apports, and the levitation of the medium herself (Lombroso, 1909).

The list of eminent scientists who saw Palladino produce apparently genuine phenomena but who also warned against her use of fraud includes Richet, Morselli, Ochorowicz, Maxwell, Flammarion, and many more. The list of those who agreed she was genuine is even longer (see e.g. Fodor, 1933 or Tabori, 1968, for useful brief summaries, and Carrington, 1909, for more detail). As Carrington put it when describing the American trip (Carrington, 1918, p.129):—

Fraud was discovered it is true, but it was also found by practically everyone who has ever investigated Eusapia's powers seriously . . . [when] unable to produce genuine phenomena she will resort to trickery—trickery of a type well known to exist, and described by Richet, Morselli and others, years before . . . Yet in spite of these facts when trickery was discovered [in America] it was heralded forth as a great discovery, and the public gained the impression that it had been discovered for the first time! Had the investigators in America studied the case more carefully and for longer . . . they would have ascertained—as did their European confrères—that genuine phenomena were also produced: and that their task was to sift and separate the two classes of phenomena.

Carrington had in fact even gone to the length of describing Palladino's fraudulent methods in a circular letter sent to sitters *before* Palladino landed in America. Not surprisingly, the European investigators who had sat with Palladino were singularly unimpressed by the trumpeting of fraud from across the Atlantic. Richet, who had over 100 sittings with Palladino, does not even mention it when discussing Palladino's career (Richet, 1923).

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

P/R take the view that not only was there "submission of the experimenters to the medium in the matter of controls" (a point I have already dealt with), but that she used "sexual calls". It is odd that none of those who worked extensively with Palladino accuses her of such behaviour, and the charges

come almost exclusively from her critics. Are we seriously to believe, on the evidence presented by P/R, that she was attempting to divert F/B/C by the use of her sexual charms? Close bodily contact by controllers with mediums during trance is often unavoidable, and the examples P/R give only demonstrate the extent to which critics interpret events in terms of their own prejudgements. The same comment applies to the examples they offer in support of their argument that Palladino misdirected the investigators and appeared to cooperate with them "only to have things then go her way".

What is of far more psychological interest is why Palladino resorted to fraud. Her own explanation, that her guide compelled her to do so, has been mentioned above. But Carrington's explanation seems much the more likely.

. . . she depends for successful results upon a power over which she has little or no voluntary control. Sometimes it is forthcoming, and sometimes it is not. When it is, the phenomena begin at once, and nothing can stop them . . . At other times . . . the power . . . is weak . . . after waiting for an hour or more, with no result, Eusapia will insist upon less light, and will then resort to fraud . . . Her vanity is the cause of all the trouble. Did she but say to her sitters that she could do nothing that night, all would be well; but rather than admit failure she would resort to any device . . . It is a great pity, but no amount of argument will influence her in the least . . .

[Carrington, 1918, p. 181]

## CONCLUSION

Little needs to be said about the tighter controls proposed by P/R in their penultimate section (headed "What They Could Have Done"), as the subject of controls has already been discussed at some length. It is worth saying however that there is no indication that Palladino brought her own "tested/silent" chair to the sittings along with her table and curtains, as P/R suggest. If she had done so, it would surely have been mentioned in the Report. A more likely explanation for the discrepancies in seating shown in the picture facing p. 321 of the Report is that Palladino was given the bedroom chair, while the other chairs, far from being "obviously the ones already present in the hotel room" as P/R suppose, were brought in by hotel staff to provide extra seating. The Victoria Hotel (at that time "one of the principal hotels in Naples" as the Report makes clear) would hardly provide their guests with upright wooden chairs as bedroom furniture (we in fact see two of them stacked together in the picture facing p. 375). In any case, from Séance V onwards, the sitters all appear to have used the same straw-seated chairs (p. 421).

Going through P/R's article it seems that not only do they provide no new information on Palladino's fraudulent behaviour, they do not show that such fraud can explain much of what was witnessed by F/B/C during the Naples séances. Far from demonstrating, as they claim, that F/B/C were "a group of highly incompetent researchers", they only draw attention to the care with which these gentlemen recorded such facts as the type of knots and cords used to tie Palladino; the space between Palladino's feet and legs and the table during levitations; the space between her and the curtains of the cabinet; the presence of exact hand and foot controls at relevant moments, the relative positions of the investigators; and the intensity of the light. P/R's article also unintentionally draws attention to the need to become acquainted with the extensive and painstaking literature on Palladino (including original sources)

before advancing such conclusions as “we strongly suspect that she was only a very good magician, who depended on her highly polished and rehearsed methods of deception for her living”. The article also demonstrates how unwise it is to indulge in defamatory accusations of gullibility and incompetence against Feilding and his colleagues without studying the Feilding Report with the care it deserves.

In order to emphasise further the competence of the investigators, I close with some additional information on Carrington, since it was he who invited Palladino to America and he who provides us with the fullest details of the séances she held there, and on Feilding, as leading investigator. After Carrington’s death, Henry Gilroy—for five years Executive Director of the American Psychical Institute established by Carrington in 1932—described him to Paul Tabori in the following words:—

... he did not know what it was to lie—he was the most truthful person I have ever met . . . He was a great man. He knew his business far better than most people ever will. What little knowledge I have of psychical research I gained from him—as did thousands of others from his books, his lectures, his painstaking work . . . he went on to the end of his life as a true pioneer and an indefatigable searcher for truth. I was proud to be his friend.

[Tabori 1972, p. 60]

I suspect that many of those who knew Carrington would have echoed these words. Of Feilding, Eric Dingwall, that perceptive and demanding critic, had this to say (Dingwall, in Feilding, 1963): “In over fifty years of psychical research I found Everard Feilding to be the most acute and well-balanced investigator I ever encountered, and, in addition, one of the noblest characters I ever met.”

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## SOME CRITICAL COMMENTS ON THE THESIS OF "EUSAPIA'S SAPIENT FOOT"

by ALFONSO MARTÍNEZ-TABOAS

### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critique of Polidoro and Rinaldi's (1998) paper, where they posit that Eusapia constantly fooled the authors of the Feilding Report with the use of her legs and feet. The main objective is to examine in detail their arguments and data. It is concluded that Polidoro and Rinaldi's data are mostly anecdotal and that their characterization of Feilding, Baggally and Carrington is highly misleading. The thesis of the wondrous "sapient foot" is unsupported and unconvincing as an explanation of the Feilding Report.

The Feilding Report (Feilding, Baggally & Carrington, 1909/1963) is surely one of the most detailed and thought-provoking documents in the history of psychical research. As such, from the very moment of its appearance, sceptics have tried to explain away the innumerable and striking phenomena recorded in minute detail in the report (see, for example, Hansel, 1980; Houdini, 1924; Kurtz, 1985; Podmore, 1910; Rawcliffe, 1959; Wiseman, 1992).

The most recent attempt to 'explain' away sceptically, and once and for all, the phenomena recorded in the Feilding Report is an article by Polidoro and Rinaldi (P & R) (1998). In this paper I will try to demonstrate two main points: (1) that P & R's article basically contains nothing new, except an extraordinary arrogance on their part; (2) that P & R's main points and data are greatly overstated, to the point of being unconvincing. I will discuss the two points in turn.

### POLIDORO AND RINALDI'S POSITION PAPER CONTAINS NEARLY NOTHING NEW

P & R's main point is that Eusapia freed her left foot and her hands to produce all 470 physical phenomena described in the Feilding Report. But, if one reads prior criticisms of Eusapia, one can easily find that nearly all the critics have repeatedly postulated that she produced her phenomena by freeing her feet and hands. Let's quote some of them:—

Eusapia did not require any complicated apparatus—a handkerchief, a coin or piece of paper covered with some phosphorescent preparation were sufficient. The main part of her technique was surreptitiously freeing her hands and feet.

[Hodgson, 1895–96, p. 132]

Her [Eusapia's] tricks were usually childish: long hairs attached to small objects in order to produce 'telekinetic movements'; the gradual substitution of one hand for two when being controlled by sitters; the production of 'phenomena' with a foot which had been surreptitiously removed from its shoe, and so on.

[Price, 1939, p. 190]

Now there is a time-honoured device, exposed in the seventies by Moncure Conway, and afterwards by Maskelyne and others, by which mediums at dark séances succeed in freeing themselves from the control of the sitter. It may be described briefly as the art of making one hand (or one foot) do duty for two.

[Podmore, 1963, p. 200, writing about Eusapia]

Other authors who explicitly mention Eusapia's tricks with her hands and