

NORTHCOTE W. THOMAS



CRYSTAL  
GAZING

# Crystal Gazing

## *Its History And Practice, With A Discussion Of The Evidence For Telepathic Scrying*

Northcote W. Thomas,

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## **Crystal Gazing**

### **INTRODUCTION**

" Do you believe in crystal gazing? " is a question which one is often asked. One can only reply: " What do you mean by believing in crystal gazing? If you mean, Do I believe that it is worth while to pay half-a-crown, or a guinea, as a fee to a person who professes to discover by crystal gazing the whereabouts of lost property, or of a missing friend, or to foretell events ? — I do not ' believe in crystal gazing.' One hears wonderful tales of successes in this kind, but not at first-hand; and the people who tell them are not very critical, while the practises are, to begin with, breaking the

law. But if the question means, Do I believe that some people have the faculty of seeing faces, places, persons in motion, sometimes recognisable, in a glass ball, or in water, ink, or any clear deep? — then I do believe in the existence of this faculty. Whether the things thus seen ever answer, except by fortuitous coincidence, to thoughts in another person's mind, things unknown to the crystal gazer, is a different question, to which I return later. But as to the actual existence of an experience which the gazer can only describe as " seeing " such or such things in the glass ball I have no doubt whatever. I shall use for the practice the old English word " scrying " — a form, one may guess, of " descrying." Perhaps I may as well give the grounds of my belief, as far as that belief extends. Like other people, I had heard and read, all my life, of " magic mirrors " — ever since, in childhood, I perused the Notes to " The Lay of the Last Minstrel," and Scott's story, " My Aunt Margaret's Mirror," and Kingsley's Egyptian chapters in " Eothen." Like other people, I thought the stories nothing but mediaeval or Oriental romances. But Miss Goodrich-Freer published an essay on crystal gazing in the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research. The essay contained a brief and interesting history of the practice, and records of personal experiences by the author, " Miss X," whose real name I did not know. I was staying at a hospitable country house, a castle with an ancient legend for being " haunted." None of us ever saw any of the traditional spectres. We sent to London for a glass ball, in which none of us could see anything that was not very natural and normal. The hostess was the last who tried: she found that the ball first yielded mere reflections, then seemed to grow milky, then black, and then pictures appeared. These to some slight degree rather disturbed her equanimity, being novel in her experience, and not corresponding to any conscious thoughts in her mind, which might have suggested them to a person very capable of " visualising " — that is, forming

pictures " in her mind's eye " of the object of her conscious thoughts. This power exists in very various degrees, perhaps especially in women, children, and people of genius. Thackeray and Dickens have left descriptions of their own power of visualising: perhaps most imaginative writers possess it, but other writers possess it, who do not seem to be successfully imaginative. The crystal pictures, however, were seen, not " in the mind's eye," but projected outwards into the glass, and did not correspond to any thoughts which the gazer knew that she was thinking, or had ever thought.

This lady's faculty went no further. In perhaps one case she partially beheld the object on which a friend fixed his mind; in another she saw a curious mystical design that we shortly afterwards found on the cover of a book, recently published, which had not then reached us, and in a third case, when scrying in the crystal cover of a miniature of the Chevalier de St George (James III. and VIII.), she saw what might be explained as the march of his army across the field of Shirramuir. But there was no evidence to anything unusual in such scrys.

I got a glass ball, and, at St Andrews and elsewhere, people of both sexes, and of many social conditions, from my cook of that day (who made the experience casually, as she saw the ball lying about), to golfers, men of business, men of letters, a physician — all sorts and conditions of men and women, friends, kinsfolk, and chance acquaintances of my own. The proportion of successes in " seeing " crystal pictures was very great — unusually so, I believe. The subject had not then won its way into magazines and general literature and conversation, yet the symptoms, so to say, were identical in cases of success. The ball grew milky, then black; then the pictures appeared, as an almost invariable rule, though the experimenters were not told

what to expect, and were quite ignorant of the little that had been written on the topic. I, therefore, took leave to think that all experimenters were not playing on my artless confidence. One lady tried to scry in a glass jug of water. She saw landscapes, an " Ecce Homo," and other things, and doubted whether the Church (she was of the ancient faith) sanctioned the practice. She added, what was curious, that, as a child, she used to spill ink, gaze into it, and see such pictures as she now beheld in the water.

An incident occurred which I have narrated elsewhere. I lent the ball to a Miss Balfour, who only then saw, I think, an old-fashioned piece of furniture. Her brother laughed at her, and took the ball into the study, whence he returned, looking perplexed. He admitted that he had seen a person whom he knew, under a lamp. This was at about 5 p.m., on a Sunday, at St Andrews. He would find out on Tuesday, he said, whether he had seen right or wrong. Miss Balfour told me this. On Tuesday Mr. Balfour met, at a dance, in Edinburgh, a lady, Miss Grant.

"On Sunday, at five o'clock," he said, " you were seated under a standard lamp, making tea. A man in blue serge was beside you; his back was towards me; I saw the tip of his moustache. You wore a dress [described] that I never saw you wearing."

"Were the blinds up?" asked the lady.

"I don't know; I was at St Andrews," said Mr. Balfour.

The lady said that all the facts were correct, and she and Mr. Balfour wrote out and signed a report of the incident. I had heard Miss Balfour's account of the person seen under a lamp before I learned the conclusion of the story. Not long afterwards Mr. Balfour lunched with me. We spoke of "

Miss X," Miss Goodrich-Freer and her experiments, on the links before luncheon. Afterwards, in my study, Mr. Balfour, who was smoking, gazed into a glass bowl of water. He saw as much of a house as you do see from the hall. The arrangement, as to flooring, doors, windows, and staircase, was of a kind unknown to both of us. A white Persian cat, in the picture, walked down the stairs. The picture lasted long, and I made several changes in the lighting of the room. When I drew down the blind the picture remained, but the large window opposite the front door, in the crystal picture of the house, disappeared.

I happened, later, to meet Miss Goodrich-Freer, whom Mr. Balfour had never seen in his life, and told her what he had beheld.

" My house, my Persian cat !" said the lady.

I had never been in this house, but visited it on my return to town. Mr. Balfour's description of what he saw in the picture was absolutely correct, but the Persian cat was out. His existence, however, is amply attested.

Possibly many crystal pictures, unidentified, have their actual model somewhere, but the prototype, in this case, was discovered by the merest chance. Mr. Balfour, a man of strong sense, argued that the picture of the cat was a whiff of tobacco smoke, and the house a thing fancifully constructed out of light, shadows, and reflections. The coincidence remained that, out of these, he had " architected " and furnished a house on a system utterly unknown to himself or to me, yet actually existing, and the house was tenanted by a white Persian cat.

The instances which I have given are only a few out of the multitude within my experience. " But your experience,"

the sceptic will say, " is only that of a listener or a looker-on. You see a man or woman stare at a ring, a jug of water, a glass bowl the ink in an inkpot, or what not; the person who stares then tells you that he or she sees this or that picture, whereas he sees no picture at all in the crystal. Either he is merely practising on your credulity, or he honestly believes that he sees what he says he sees, but does not see. In the latter case, to put the matter as it is usually stated: ' It is all imagination. "

At this point may I take it as conceded that all my friends, kinsfolk, and acquaintances who tell me that they see pictures in the glass ball are not mere practical jokers, playing on my credulity? Really, they are so numerous, and many of them are such grave substantial characters, and their experiences, as described, agree with each other in so many points, that I think it would only be fair to exclude the hypothesis of hoaxing, as a general rule.

This point I am anxious to secure, and in proof I wish to cite the behaviour of some of the people whom I have observed. Some six years ago I was staying in early spring at a Highland hotel, when very few visitors had assembled. With me was a young kinswoman, or " kinsgirl," Miss Gregor, whom I had known since her childhood; she was healthy, veracious, and, as far as becomes her sex, athletic. She had just found out that she could see pictures in a glass ball. At the dinner-table with us were two young Englishmen, strangers to us. They tried the glass ball, and, finding that they had the faculty of " scrying," or seeing pictures, were interested, and made some experiments in their own rooms. One tried looking at the ball in darkness, at night. He said that it seemed to become of a fiery quality, glowing bright, but in these conditions he saw no pictures in the glow. By daylight or artificial light he saw pictures, usually of people known to him, and members of his family.



One lady, he said, he saw always in an inverted position, as when you look at the sitter through a photographic camera. I have not found another example of this eccentricity. The remarks appeared to be candid, and the experiment in the dark was like that of another friend, an engineer, who tried excluding all light, and gazing into a funnel. The field of vision, in his case, became luminous, and pictures appeared.

Evidence of this kind must be " subjective "; we have only the word of the experimenter for it. But we have only people's words for all subjective psychological facts, such as " coloured audition " (the association of colours with sounds), the viewing of numerals in colours and symmetric patterns, the arabesques seen by Herschel, and so forth.

Miss Gregor, in one of her earliest experiments, saw very distinctly Dunstaffnage Castle, the old home of the Dalriada kings, near Oban, which we had been visiting. She also saw a lady, well known to both of us, sitting alone, and playing at a card game, in which little bags of counters are used.

She had once seen the lady playing at this game in company, but we found, on inquiry, that the lady had in fact, been playing alone, for the first time, just before the picture was seen in the glass ball. No doubt this was a merely accidental coincidence.

We then tried the usual experiment, myself and Miss Hamilton being present. Miss Hamilton was to think; Miss Gregor was to see the object of her thought. Miss Gregor saw a lady, " like your mother, but not your mother. Her complexion is ruddy, her eyes are brown, she is dressed in black, her hair is white," and she described 'the coiffure. I at once recognised the description, that of a lady well known to me, whom Miss Gregor had never seen. "It is

right," said Miss Hamilton; "I was thinking of my aunt, my mother's sister."

We then called in a Mr. Brown to do the thinking. Miss Gregor then saw the two young Englishmen already mentioned (who had left), fishing in a boat on the loch.

" I began by fixing my mind on them," said Mr. Brown, " but at the last I was thinking of the big trout they caught."

This was a kind of success. So we tried next day, Mrs. Hamilton as thinker. Miss Gregor saw her daughter Marjory, then in London, painting at an easel, in a blue linen smock. But Mrs. Hamilton had been thinking of a favorite dog, and Marjory did not even possess a blue smock to cover her dress when painting. Then I tried. What I thought of I forget, but what Miss Gregor saw was — John Knox. Later, I remembered that, some days before, I had thought of John Knox, but Miss Gregor had seen something else. She did not remember this, and I forgot it too, till after an interval of some hours. We all taunted Miss Gregor as " a fraudulent medium," which she " took very unconcernedly," as the Christian carrier " took his shooting by Claverhouse's dragoons." Out of four attempts she had missed twice, once scored a bull's eye, and once an outer.

As in many other cases, her efforts were wont to be "there or thereabouts." In her experiment with her mother she saw a back view of that lady and a friend, Mrs. Black, standing in a great hall, looking upward: at what they were looking she did not know. But what Mrs. Gregor was thinking of was the tall " Haida totem post," in the hall of the Anthropological Museum at Oxford, which, some weeks earlier, she had visited in company with the lady here styled Mrs. Black. It is a gigantic post, carved with the totemic armorial quarterings of a Haida gentleman, and

originally erected in front of his hut, as is the custom. Thus Miss Gregor was in close but not absolutely perfect contact with her mother's reflections, much as in the case of the men in the boat and the big trout. Whether these coincidences were mere chance work, or had some other origin, everyone may decide according to his taste and fancy. But, out of the whole universe of things thinkable, Miss Gregor made good shots in three out of five cases given; she had a "memory picture" of a thing forgotten by both of us in the John Knox case; and, in Mrs. Hamilton's case, the picture seems to have been the result of a guess, conscious or subconscious.

Another spontaneous and successful "seeing" of Miss Gregor's was the most remarkable known to me, as it involved the successful discernment of a string of names and numerals, and was thoroughly well attested. But in this instance no glass ball was used, the names and numerals appeared as if written on a black-board, no effort having been made to see them in the mind's eye.

These experiments were, of course, unscientific, and undertaken for mere idle amusement. The method of statistics was not applied; there were not, in my knowledge, more experiments made than those which I have chronicled, with one other, on the same level of success as the affair of the totem post. One case, we have seen, was not an experiment.

To amuse an eminent savant and me, Miss Gregor looked into a ball, while nobody directed her mind to anything in particular. Miss Gregor saw a very tall savage, with a still taller bow, such as she had never beheld, nor I either, for that matter. Next day our friend pointed out to us in a museum a Patagonian bow which "answered to pattern." The fact that he is an anthropologist would naturally attract

Miss Gregor's mind to savages, whose bows, except in the Patagonian case, are usually short, though she probably did not know it.

Everyone can see that, to prove, in Miss Gregor's case, that her mind is, in some unknown way, in contact with the minds of the experimenters who do the thinking, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of careful experiments must be made, and the proportion of bull's eyes, centres, outers, and misses must be recorded. Not being a mathematician, I do not know how many failures and outers, out of five hundred experiments, would prove the centres and bull's eyes to be the mere result of chance coincidence. But the field of possible errors is coexistent with the thinkable universe — that is, the person who does the thinking may choose any one of millions of things unknown to the crystal gazer. If, then, the crystal gazer is right in a considerable percentage of cases, to my unmathematical mind it does look as if some unknown human faculty and fact in nature may be surmised. If this be so, it may be presumed that some quality in the mind of the thinker as well as of the gazer must be in tune if the experiment is to be successful.

I may be an idle enthusiast, but I cannot help thinking that some official professor of psychology might make experiments. He would, if successful, be treated as M. Blondlot, of the "N-rays," is used by many of his learned colleagues; but, if his experiments were dead failures, he would have his reward, and his name would be great in the scientific Israel. At present the position of M. Blondlot, whether he is in the right, or whether he is *un pauvre hallucine* (as Dr Janet said of a lady often mentioned in this book), cannot be called enviable. But Lady Mary Wortley Montague, and Jenner, and Braid, and Elliston, and Simpson, had troubles from learned colleagues to face in

the matters of inoculation, vaccination, hypnotism, and chloroform.

One very eminent professor of psychology told me, some years ago, that he could not find anyone who professed to see even fancy pictures in a glass ball. My experience is different, but I am so lazy ! I have just passed a month under the roof of a relation who, in a solitary experiment made some time ago, " saw"; but I had not a glass ball, and did not know how to procure one, not being aware that they are kept in stock, as Mr. Thomas tells us, by the Society for Psychical Research, 20 Hanover Square. The glass jug of water has inconveniences in practice, and many people who can " see " in glass balls cannot " see " in ink.

So far, I have mainly been arguing that all my " scryers " are not practical jokers. In corroboration, when I examined savage practice, and barbaric and ancient practice, I found that from the Australian black fellows to the Maoris, the Samoyeds, the Iroquois, the Incas, the Aztecs, the Malagasies, the negroes, the Arabs, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the mediaeval European nations, all were crystal gazers. If they saw no pictures at all in crystals, polished basalt, obsidian mirrors, blood drops, ink, water, livers of animals, and so on, it is not in nature that all should go on " scrying." They must have made the discovery of the faculty by accident, like the lady already mentioned, who, as a child, amused herself by " scrying " in ink; and like George Sand, who, in childhood, used the polished back of a screen, and appears never to have heard of any other instance of the practice.

I do not think we can state the facts at a lower level than this:

Some persons can, and others cannot, " see " pictures, not voluntarily or consciously evoked and " visualised," in a smooth deep. This is a circumstance in human psychology quite as curious as the visions of coloured lines of numerals, established by Mr. Francis Galton. But official psychologists, as a rule, avoid the subject. Are they influenced by an aversion to the inquiry as to whether the things seen, in some cases, appear to reflect the unknown thought of a party to the experiment? That way, to be sure, lies " the occult," a word rendered terrific by silly enthusiasts. In merely examining crystal gazing we are on the border of the realm of quackery, fraud, blind credulity, avid hopes, and superstitious fears. There is no doubt at all that, this border once crossed, even minds practised in the physical sciences often cease to be scientific or sensible. I have read, with distaste, the credulities and wild speculations published (about affairs beyond the border) by more than one man of eminence in this or that field of orthodox science. The lucubrations of other savants who have just peeped across the border in a spirit of cursing, like that of Balaam, are often more entertaining, so reckless are these gentlemen, sometimes, of accuracy and even of honesty — the dishonesty being " subconscious," no doubt. Thus we can explain the aversion of men of science to the examination of phenomena — no more offensive, really, than the dreams of the day or the night. They are phenomena of human nature, exercises of human faculty, and, as such, invite study. To shirk examination is less than courageous.

If I have proved, or made it highly probable, that all my crystal gazers are not practical jokers, there remains the theory that ' it is all imagination.' But what is " imagination " ? How do you define it, and how does your definition apply to the case?