

### 34. MEDIUMS AND SPIRITISM IN NAPLES

The final decades of the XVIII century and the early years of the XIX century, the period known as the *Belle Epoque*, were marked by a huge new interest in the **esoteric** which encompassed both philosophical meditation as well as medical treatment. Theosophical and anthroposophical theories were elaborated, and lots of spiritism sessions were held. There was interest in astrological predictions and experiments into hypnosis. All of these different practices were very popular at the time, and artists and writers in particular were very much influenced by them. However, many scientists also studied the so-called **parapsychological** phenomena. In Naples, apart from the famous **Eusapia Palladino**, two other famous names frequently appeared on the pages of the specialist press: **Pasquale Erto** e **Nino Pecoraio**.

Erto's speciality was physical phenomena like lights, moving objects and cold winds, and bids to test him out – according to contemporary accounts – included tying his hands and arms to his body (sometimes handcuffing him), putting large gloves or plaster casts on his hands and making him wear huge pyjamas or sacks with drawstrings which would then be tied up round his neck. The medium generally submitted to these tests quite willingly, and he even indicated during the séance when his hands needed to be held, or the knots pulled tighter. Entering into **the trance** usually followed a set pattern, and during the session there were usually a couple of breaks. When the session resumed, the lighting in the room would invariably change.

During his latter years, Erto was accused of serious **fraud** on two occasions by respected foreign academics who had watched him at work; **Eugène Osty** and **Harry Price**. He was obviously not very happy about this because being discredited by them could mean **losing credibility** with people involved in psychic research and spiritism too. However, to redress the balance somewhat, two publications came out in Italy between 1931 and 1932, both favourable to Erto and both written by the lawyer **Mobilio**. One was an article in the newspaper “Idea fascista” which gave the impression there was government backing to what was said. The other was a book which recounted Erto's powers as a medium in glowing terms. However, neither the criticism nor the two favourable publications were sufficient to solve the **Erto case**. Debate as to whether his powers were genuine or not got more and more heated but the issue was impossible to solve. In Naples the spiritism sessions continued, nonetheless, and were often held at the home of Professor **Emanuele Sorge**, who was a well-known Chair from the local Regia University. Other university teachers were often involved as Sorge often invited his colleagues and distinguished academics to observe Erto at work in a bid to clear him of accusations of fraud. However, there were very few serious converts amongst these academics.

Nino Pecoraio, also a Neapolitan, was famous for his gift of **precognition** which had first manifested itself when he was a child. He emigrated to America in 1921 and embarked on a “career” as a medium, often submitting to all kinds of tests and studies. During one of his many New York meetings, he met the famous writer **Arthur Conan Doyle** who had come to America to research spiritistic phenomena. Doyle was keen to rid himself of the label of Detective Story Writer, and so was working on historical novels and essays on spiritism. He was thus a dogged supporter of spiritism and paranormal phenomena, and his belief in apparitions and other phenomena was such that he would deny the evidence of facts. Conan Doyle, along with others, witnessed a session where there were examples of telekinesis, unexplained noises, gusts of wind and sounds when the Neapolitan medium had his hands and legs bound with wire

However, even for Pecoraio, the moment came when his tricks were revealed. It happened when he dared to challenge the great **Houdini**, the “king of handcuffs” who was on the committee of the “Scientific American” investigating paranormal phenomena. Houdini had, as a result, had the opportunity to observe a lot of mediums. He uncovered all their tricks. Houdini reckoned it would be so simple to fool the Neapolitan medium that he declined to

even meet him. Pecoraio returned to Naples, where he carried on producing paranormal phenomena for a few more years. He claimed he had foreseen the **Superga hill plane crash**, 4 May 1949, which brought a swift end to the history of the “Great Turin” football team.