

“TELL ME, PRETTY GYPSY”

MILES BOND, O.P.



TELL me, pretty Gypsy, what the future holds for me.” Thus ran the lyrics of a war-time song-hit. The song is no longer popular, but the idea contained in those opening words is becoming immensely so—the idea of seeking the future from fortunetellers. The next line in the ballad; supposedly sung by the Gypsy, “Kindly cross my palm with silver,” is being rendered, in effect, by a chorus of 100,000 soothsayers (neither pretty nor Gypsy) operating throughout the length and breadth of the United States. And the American public is naïvely complying with their request to the tune of \$125,000,000 annually. These facts were disclosed in a widespread investigation of the fortune-telling racket, privately made by a well-known authority on the subject. The “chorus” includes a motley conglomeration of crystal gazers, astrologers, numerologists, palmists, phrenologists, card manipulators, tea-leaf readers and other charlatans ranging all the way from the back alley “voo-doo” woman to the Fifth Avenue “swami.”

At the time of the investigation, between 15,000 and 20,000 seers in New York City alone were found to be extracting, with the aid of a little incense and a great deal of nonsense, more than \$25,000,000 yearly from a clientele which should know better. In Chicago, where the annual fleecing was found to approximate \$12,000,000, one star gazer, a male, had as customers 100 successful business men who paid him \$1,000 a year each for a monthly business horoscope which was discovered to be simply a form letter sent out with a bland disregard of the client’s particular business.

The investigation also exploded two popular fallacies with regard to fortune-telling: that its devotees consist mostly of the feminine sex; and that its victims are chiefly the uneducated and those of small means. As a matter of fact, the clientele list was found to include men as well as women from all classes of society, and upon it appeared an astonishing number of names of bank presidents, stock brokers, attorneys, college professors,

society women and United States senators and congressmen. In the Wall Street section of New York, many diviners are said to maintain luxurious establishments which are visited daily by hundreds of the "investment kings" of the district.

What are the customers actually receiving for their annual output of \$125,000,000? Is it possible that so many otherwise intelligent and practical-minded American citizens are allowing themselves to be "taken in" on such a gigantic scale by an army of quack prognosticators? Undoubtedly they are, and undoubtedly many of them suspect that they are, yet so irresistible is the temptation to believe what they would *like* to believe, that most of them go back time and time again, unaware that one of the tricks of the fortune-telling trade is to tell the customer what he would like to be told and in small doses; this necessitates repeated "readings" at, say, five dollars per reading.

That the divining profession is, for the most part, one huge fraud is evident on *a priori* grounds, since no creature, but only God alone, can know with certainty future events, at least the type of future event the soothsayer professes to predict, viz., those which depend upon chance or the free will of man. The investigation revealed the actual fact of the fraud in a rather convincing manner. In every case investigated the whole of the seer's art was found to consist in a certain craftiness in obtaining information about the client and an adeptness in deducing conclusions from the information obtained. When a customer is so unwary as to give his right name when making an appointment (and most of them are), it is comparatively easy to obtain this information. With the aid of a city directory or a telephone book, the soothsayer or his assistant can usually discover where their victim lives and possibly his place of business. Any number of stratagems may then be used to obtain further information. A favorite one is a surreptitious telephone call to his home or office from which a number of things may be learned about his family, his business, his probable social and economic status, etc. In one instance a fortuneteller called the home of a prospective client and under the pretence of being a photographer desiring to take free pictures of the children, obtained their names, ages, the school they attended, regretted they were not the proper age for free pictures and politely hung up—but armed with enough personal information to convince his customer of his "supernatural" powers and dispose him to believe almost anything he chose to tell him.

When a fortune seeker drops in without appointment or comes with a friend, it is a bit more difficult to obtain information about him, due to lack of time. His name is taken and he is ushered at once into the presence of the seer. In the meantime an assistant makes desperate attempts to obtain, by telephone, a few facts about him. Sometimes these facts are relayed to the fortuneteller during the actual course of an interview by means of a picture with a sliding panel hung somewhere behind the client, and into which a placard is slid containing the information in readable signs. Another method is to slip a card through a curtain in back of the seer's chair. When a fictitious name or no name at all is given, the task is still more difficult. The seer must then rely on his wits, which he has trained for just such emergencies. Sometimes, by means of clever questions and suggestions, he can induce the person to disclose a number of things about himself without ever suspecting that he has done so. One diviner, when asked if he had difficulty in making his customers talk, replied that he had greater difficulty keeping them quiet long enough to let him talk. A trained seer can discover a great many things about his customer by observing his mannerisms, his accent, the material or cut of his clothes, jewelry, emblems, etc. The information thus obtained he dresses up in flowery language and hands back to a mystified and thoroughly convinced client. Should all means of obtaining information fail, the seer has to deal in generalities—"You may expect a change but not at once," "The problem you have in mind should not worry you for it will come out all right though not as you expect." The means used for the supposed forecasting, whether it be gazing into a crystal, reading the palm or studying a horoscope, are simply the hokum dictated by fad or public taste. At present the pseudo-sciences, such as astrology, numerology, etc., are the most popular, especially among the more educated classes.

From the information obtained from various sources, the seer can usually conclude what sort of future the customer would like to have or what he would be most likely to believe and proceeds to deal it out to him in sufficiently obscure verbiage, at a handsome profit. In one case, for instance, the fortuneteller, by comparing an old and a new telephone book, discovered that his client had recently moved from an apartment to a new residential district, indicating an increase in affluence and the establishment of a new home. He therefore con-

cluded, quite naturally, that the man would not want to change his residence again for some time and therefore advised him not to consider any change which would necessitate leaving town. The client, who had consulted the fortuneteller to ascertain whether or not he should accept a position offered to him in another city, went away thoroughly convinced of the seer's powers and promptly turned down an excellent opportunity.

But despite the fraud, the fact remains that the glamorous predictions of the soothsayer are believed and, what is worse, are acted upon by thousands of sober, serious-minded, well educated men and women. And from a merely natural viewpoint, is it so strange that they should be believed? Man has a strong, innate inclination to peer into the future. Tomorrow is often more real for him than today. He has, moreover, whether it be from self-love, pride or ambition, a propensity for picturing himself as riding the crest of success and fortune and is easily convinced by anyone who essays to assure him that he will attain that enviable perch. (Fortunetellers are aware that to forecast misfortunes injures their business). Besides, he is naturally prone to attribute apparently unexplainable effects to supernatural causes and thus the knowledge of his intimate affairs displayed by the fortuneteller is very apt to convince him of the presence of some mysterious, super-human power. Or perhaps experience has taught him to mistrust his own judgment and inclines him to seek advice about his future actions from some apparently reliable source. It is often convenient to have something or someone other than himself upon whom to place the responsibility for his actions. No doubt that is why the art of divination is practically as old as man, why it has been found in some form or other in all ages and among all peoples. In ancient Babylon and Assyria, every movement of the monarch and his court was regulated by forecasts of the official diviners and astrologers. The ancient Romans would never think of undertaking a battle or setting out on an expedition without seeking advice from some oracle or augur, who depended for his inspiration upon nothing more supernatural than the entrails of a slain animal.

Small wonder then that fortune-telling is still a very lucrative business, for human nature is one of the invariables. In the natural order, therefore, it is apparently more difficult not to believe than to believe the predictions of the prognosticator. And therein lurks grave and insidious danger for him who con-

sults one out of curiosity or in a spirit of fun, because as soon as he believes the predictions of the fortuneteller he is himself guilty of the sin of divination, since he is thereby seeking a knowledge of future and hidden things by inadequate means, from signs and not from causes. As long as the "just for fun" attitude is genuine, he might be excused from at least a grave sin against the First Commandment, but how many times can he consult a fortuneteller before the sincerity of that attitude might well be called into question? The danger of believing is always present and usually grows greater with each successive visit. When the visits have become habitual or are occasioned by anxiety to know about some particular matter, it is fairly evident that the fun seeker has become gradually metamorphosed into a genuine believer, though he might be unwilling to admit it even to himself.

Were you to tell the Catholic frequenter of fortunetellers that he is guilty of devil worship, he would probably laugh at you. Yet that, in a sense, is precisely the case. His reason alone, to say nothing of Faith, should tell him that without a divine revelation no human being is able to foretell future events which depend upon chance or the free will of man. And to suppose that God would choose a turbaned faker with a shingle over his door as an instrument for the conveyance of Divine Truth is little less than blasphemy. Therefore, when he believes what the diviner tells him, he is admitting at least tacitly and implicitly that the information is coming from the only other possible source, the devil. But the devil, being a creature, is of himself incapable of knowing with certainty this type of future event, and to seek information from him is to attribute to him a perfection which belongs to God alone; it is to pay homage to the archenemy of God, idolatry of the foulest kind.

However, despite the almost universal presence of pure and simple fraud in the art of divination as practiced today, there is little doubt that Satan does frequently mix himself up in these delvings into the future and by way of suggestion uses these fake prophets as mouthpieces in order to trap unsuspecting souls. While he can, of himself, know only those hidden and future things which God permits him to know, he has a conjectural knowledge far superior to that of man; that is to say, by reason of his long experience and intimate knowledge of man's nature, he is able to foresee with some degree of accuracy how this or that man will probably act under certain circum-

stances. Moreover, from external manifestations, such as facial expression, words, and actions, he can judge much more accurately than we can the nature of a man's thoughts or desires. By suggestion, he is able to communicate this information to the fortuneteller and to propose what advice he should give to the client, advice which will cater to his moral weaknesses and lead him into occasions of sin. The victim is thus brought gradually and imperceptibly under the influence of the Evil One through the instrumentality of a charlatan who is probably completely unaware that he is being used as a tool of Satan. (In some isolated cases the extraordinary results obtained give strong evidence that the seer is in conscious contact with the evil spirits and deliberately invoking and obtaining their assistance). The most common effects of this diabolical domination upon the consulter of fortunetellers are loss of faith, sins of the flesh, scandal, despair, complete mental and often physical dereliction. Truly a tragic price to pay for the little bit of "fun" derived from the first visits to the soothsayer. It is reminiscent of that age-old tale of the fascinating flame and the poor foolish moth.

For Catholics, the consulting of fortunetellers is a particularly foolish and dangerous practice; foolish, because to them has been given the precious gift of Faith which enables them to recognize God as the only true source of revelation and His Church as the only reliable interpreter of supernatural truths; dangerous, because the prospect of stealing sheep from Christ's fold is so enticing to Satan as to incite him to the utmost exercise of his cunning and treachery. Moreover, Catholics know that they have, in the confessional, the only sure and safe place to unburden their troubles and anxieties, and in their priests, the only divinely authorized advisers. Why should they degrade themselves by seeking counsel from the henchmen of Satan? Catholics above all people should trust in God's Goodness and Providence and not concern themselves with anxious queries about the future. Their request should not be "Tell me, pretty Gypsy, what the future holds for me," but rather "Strengthen me, Heavenly Father, to accept whatever You see fit to send."