



FORTUNE TELLERS NEVER STARVE

by WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM

There are always enough suckers to keep America's so-called seers in business

A YOUNG WOMAN in a beauty parlor was babbling to a friend. "My dear," she said, "you *must* consult him—I just *know* he can help you. Why, he saved my marriage! You remember when that woman—well, I did just what *he* said, and everything was all right. He looks right into your *heart*, and you come away feeling so much better! He's simply wonderful!"

Her pastor? Unfortunately, no. The lady was talking about her fortune teller.

No one knows exactly how much money the American public spends yearly on swamis, fake astrologers, tea-leaf readers, crystal gazers,

"character analysts" and "futurist counselors"—most of them as much fortune tellers as the old gypsy in her caravan. Fifteen years ago the fees were estimated at \$125,000,000, and they may easily have doubled. "Office mediums" who used to charge a dollar now charge five.

It is usual, but inaccurate, to dismiss crooked fortune tellers as mere swindlers. A majority of them depend on "repeat trade," and to bring a customer back you must give him *something* for his money, though it may not be the promised knowledge of the future. By trial and error, by shrewd observation of men, many fortune tellers have long

since worked out some of the great truths that psychology has only recently discovered.

Bouvier's *Law Dictionary* defines a fortune teller as "one who pretends to be able to reveal future events; one who pretends to knowledge of futurity." And this sort of prediction, when done for money, is illegal in many localities. The law, however, leaves room for a multitude of evasions.

The most legal method of fortune telling is also the most efficient. A crystal ball may be seized and produced in court as evidence; the ghost of your grandmother, giving you sage advice in a dark room, may be grasped in the hand and revealed as phosphorescent cheese-cloth. But the "cold reader," as he is called in the trade, works with nothing but his knowledge of men and his colossal nerve.

He reads your mind "cold"—when you walk in he has never seen you before and knows nothing about you. He looks you over and proceeds to pluck out of your mind your past, your troubles, your hopes and your fears. As long as he remembers to add, "Of course, I do not claim any occult knowledge of the future!" he is usually quite safe legally.

Indeed, he may well have started with an M.D. or Ph.D. before he discovered the rich rewards of occultism. I know of a girl trained as a psychiatric social worker who is now reading palms in a carnival. Her professional knowledge paid very little, before she learned to give it an occult disguise.

A friend of mine, for many years a successful tax-consultant, became a mind reader just for the fun

of it. He had learned about human nature from his tax clients.

A successful magician turned "mentalist" told me, "The first season I went out, I worked hotels as an entertainer and gave private readings on the side. After six weeks I carried on with nothing but the cold reading. I'm telling you, a man who can work the cold reading will never starve."

VERY LITTLE HAS BEEN written on the technique of the cold reading, which has been called "just applied psychology." A favorite formula begins with an exploratory opening, followed by a character analysis; then the formula passes to the main subjects of human interest—love and money; health and illness; friends and enemies; dangers and dreams. A dash of mystery, a solemn warning, a piece of good advice. Then the close, designed to convince the sucker, or "mark," of your supernal wisdom and bring him back for more.

The human mind is a sieve, holding what interests it and letting the rest go. A fortune teller's rapid 20-minute "spiel" may be designed only to give a sucker more than he can possibly remember, so he remembers only the "hits."

The reader who only wants the client back next Tuesday may fall back on a memorized spiel to cover an awkward mistake, or to deal with a tough client whose face tells him nothing. Usually, however, he relies on his ability to read faces and to lead the client into unconscious admissions—skills which take long practice to develop.

Of the skilled cold readers I know, only one talked freely. He

will hereinafter be designated as "John Doe, Doctor of Mental Science," a smooth-tongued old gentleman with the benevolent eye of Santa Claus and nerves of cast iron.

Dr. Doe's clients, whom I watched all one afternoon from behind doors that he left ajar for me, never knew how often they nodded, gasped, or stammered half-finished sentences of information. They left, swearing they had never even opened their mouths.

Whenever I became baffled, the good doctor would explain proudly. "Now suppose we take that woman with the rundown heels, for instance . . ."

She crossed the floor toward Doe clutching her pocket-book nervously. On her ring finger there was a telltale mark—she had removed her wedding ring, as many do, with some muddled idea of fooling the fortune teller. By the time she sat down, Doc had her classified.

Wife, probably at least two small children—she had that hunted look. Age about 35; looks beginning to go; clothes good last year but this year made over inexpertly. That meant less money this year than last. No servants—the hands revealed that. Conservative, unimaginative, timid—the uninspired costume and the timorous mouth and eyes were clues. Strain in the eyes, anxiety and some self-pity in the mouth. Probably husband trouble.

"My dear lady," he began, speaking quickly, "I am glad you have

come to consult me, for I feel I can be of help. . . . You understand, of course, that I make no claim to occult powers and do not predict the future in any way . . .

"Now I see that your *husband* is giving you some anxiety, isn't that so?" Right the first time; the lady's eyes widened, sure sign of a hit. The doctor fished. "There is another person, a woman . . ."

Wrong; the eyes narrowed. Try money. Ah, warmer—

"... and this sum of money, which must be paid . . . I see that this is not the main difficulty, there is some anxiety concerning your husband, a lack of will power—" the eyes have widened again—"to stand up to his boss . . . or is it rather that he lacks

will power in his leisure hours—" Aha! "Then his weakness for a few drinks . . . or gambling . . . I seem to see cards scattered on a table . . ."

Whoa! The brows have knitted.

"No, this weakness doesn't alarm you but one temptation he cannot resist takes the money you need, not for yourself for I can see you are not greedy (nothing like flattery to soften them up) but for your children. And I see crowds, bright colors . . . horses. Madame, your husband is a race-track addict, isn't he?"

The eyes filled with tears, and the doctor added: "There is no way I could have known this. I just plucked it out of your mind . . ."

You're in, Doctor. Treat her

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kindly now, and she will tell her whole life story. Later, you can tell it right back to her, and she will go away swearing she never opened her mouth.

Many readings, after the opening has opened up the client, become listenings. At the end, my fortune-teller friend comes in with a little common-sense advice, a little sympathy, and a reminder of how great his powers are. The client goes home almost dizzy with relief; next week, when the load returns to her mind, she can always come back.

With less worried clients, a reader may pass from his opening to his character analysis, and what he sees and what he says are two different things!

A spiteful woman's mouth has a telltale line. "You have suffered a great deal," says Dr. Doe, "from malicious people. You are too trusting and generous . . ." That's the way she sees herself.

A bad-tempered man betrays himself in nostrils and lips. "You are easily stirred by unfairness, but the world's lack of understanding makes you keep yourself under rigid control . . ." That's what *he* thinks; his wife thinks otherwise.

The cold reader, in short, may learn to describe people as they see themselves, remembering that every man thinks he is unique, that every woman *knows* she is.

If the mark does not burst into speech, the reader now can easily proceed to his subheadings. Love is the first for the young, money for the mature, health for the old.

"I can see," he tells a pretty, self-satisfied girl, "that you are very popular. In fact, you are having difficulty choosing between two or more opportunities . . ."

The fortune teller's most lucrative clients are not necessarily women, however. Financial and political leaders are often the most rewarding. With them the gambit is money, and many prosperous soothsayers peddle market advice.

Dr. Doe usually concludes by inviting questions, thus starting the most suspicious sucker talking; and whatever the client says, the reader cuts in with, "Ah, you remember I read that in your mind!" His purpose now is to bring the client to depend on him absolutely—at least until his money gives out.

Thus it is undeniable that crooked fortune telling often does serious harm. In addition to those suckers who are simply swindled out of large sums, many others are bled slowly, and the psychological damage may be serious. Dr. Doe frankly admits that as a cold reader he encourages his victims in confused thinking and superstition.

Most people who consult a Dr. Doe may think they want to know the future. If that is the case they will get what they deserve—a guess. But most of the reader's clients actually need only a little common-sense advice, sympathy, a listening ear, and a few kind words. And these, such readers as Dr. Doe will go on providing until properly trained psychological counselors are as common as blackberries.

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