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**JAMES RANDI**

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**THE  
FAITH  
HEALERS**

**Foreword by CARL SAGAN**

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**PROMETHEUS BOOKS**

Buffalo, New York

THE FAITH TRAILERS

To Gary Posner -  
with thanks for the  
valuable assistance!

Andi.  
Oct '87.

There was a small boy on crutches. I do not know his name, and I suspect I never will. But I will never forget his face, his smile, his sorrow. He is one of the millions robbed of hope and dignity by charlatans discussed in this book. Wherever and whoever he is, I apologize to him for not having been able to protect him from such an experience. I humbly dedicate this book to him and to the many others who have suffered because the rest of us began caring too late.

## Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the following persons for their help in gathering data for this book. They did so without any promise of fame or fortune because they believed in truth.

David Alexander is a valued colleague and fellow investigator. Richard Brenneman and Shawn Carlson are faith-healer-watchers deluxe. Jason Kafcas, and Brian Schwartz provided valuable legwork in Detroit in pursuit of Peter Popoff.

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As for the conjurors who generously gave of their time, Willy Rodriguez is a clever devil who dared much for me, and Steve Shaw is the mental wonder who solved the Popoff gimmick. Bob Steiner is a busy skeptic and valued friend who brought his considerable magical talents to the work.

Joe Barnhart is a scholar who suggested valuable additions and ideas for this book. Martin Gardner, as always, has offered me perpetual support and encouragement in all these endeavors.

Walter Heckert volunteered as my German translator. Stan Krippner was generous with suggestions, and Paul Kurtz, as always, nagged me gently and continued to support me as a friend when it got tough. Gerry Larue knew much of what I only suspected about various scalawags and shared that knowledge with me. Gary Posner and Wally Sampson, both M.D.s, gave much of

their time and expertise to help me with medical advice and information.

The Bay Area Skeptics, the Houston Society to Oppose Pseudoscience, the Rationalist Association of St. Louis, the Southern California Skeptics and other, similar organizations formed a powerful group of allies who performed dedicated fieldwork and follow-ups on cases and events across the United States and Canada.

Those in the media who gave of their talents include: Eli Brecher, of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*; John Dart, of the *Los Angeles Times*; Gene Emery, of the *Providence Journal*; Leon Jaroff, former senior editor of *Time*; the staff of the *Tulsa Tribune*; Camilla Warrick, of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*; and Al White, of WWOR-TV.

The financial support of the MacArthur Foundation enabled me to travel to gather first-hand information.

Juan Carlos Alvarado helped by reading and criticizing the manuscript, and the Fort Lauderdale Public Library provided research assistance. Bill Williamson and Gary Clarke helped me with needed data and shared valuable information with me.

Johnny Carson allowed me to make my findings public and showed once more his continuing concern about misuse of the media.

Special thanks are due to Alec Jason. His electronic wizardry popped the Popoff bubble. Without his technical assistance, we could not have been nearly so effective.

Most especially, we all wish to thank Don Henvick. He is the one person above all others whose enthusiasm, dedication, and tireless efforts made much of this investigation—and this book—possible.

I must not forget that when my quest became known, many ordinary folks wrote and called me to share their experiences at the hands of faith-healers. They were a rich source of leads and information, and encouraged me to tell this story.

And very special thanks are due to David Peña, who endured the long hours, the late visitors, and the endless interviews needed to produce this manuscript and tried to ignore the clutter of stacks of paper, notebooks, videotapes, and clippings, with very few serious complaints. He also designed the jacket of this book.

On May 26, 1976, the case of Vittorio Micheli was officially recognized as miracle No. 63 at the shrine of Lourdes.

### The Search for Evidence on Micheli

The complete medical dossier on the Vittorio Micheli case has been published. A few contrary opinions appeared there, including opinions that Micheli's original diagnoses had been made without adequate data, and that he had actually received at least some orthodox medical therapy (chemical) during his hospitalization. In order to submit all available evidence to my medical colleagues, I needed good copies of the X-ray photographs. I contacted the religious magazine that had published the X-rays. It had ceased publication. I wrote Lourdes and several friends in France, asking for a source from which I might obtain the photographs. I was not successful. Finally, I submitted all available material—including poor photocopies of the radiographs—to my colleague Dr. Gary Posner for examination and evaluation. Posner agreed to discuss this data with another physician who specializes in such diagnoses.

It developed that there were major irregularities in the accounts of Micheli's treatment. First, it is "inconceivable," in Posner's opinion, that this patient had to wait 36 days before an X-ray was taken. The prescribed vitamins could certainly not have been of benefit to his condition, and a mass of the nature described would be immediately suspected of being cancerous. Furthermore, it was 43 days before the hospital performed a biopsy! There are hints in the medical reports that drugs and radiation may have been administered. One very effective medication, in particular, is mentioned.

Various writers have described this case, and one statement stands out. It is said that just before Vittorio Micheli went to Lourdes he was "given only a few days to live." When he was taken for the cobalt treatment, accounts say that then, too, he was told he had only a few days left. This estimate shows up twice in the medical reports, and is obviously wrong both times. Micheli lived on in the military hospital in great discomfort for another ten months before he went to Lourdes. It is difficult to accept the physicians' testimony that in those ten months *he received no medical treatment of any kind other than pain killers, tranquilizers, and vitamins*. What equally puzzles my medically informed colleagues is the bizarre treatment that Micheli received initially. An X-ray examination and a biopsy should have been done *within a day or two after the patient entered the hospital*.

Grace offered me, as proof of her powers, a claim that she had cured a liver condition suffered by a Connecticut woman. That lady (the subject, not the healer) showed up in person at the TV broadcast referred to above to confront me with this evidence, and though that TV audience will never be presented with what I discovered, I will share it with you here.

It had been agreed during the television presentation that I would follow up on the case Grace had produced for examination, but when I attempted to intercept that woman as she left the studio, I was blocked by Grace and a man who accompanied her. I fought my way past the pair and reached the woman as she exited the building. I asked for her address and telephone number, and she informed me that she never gave anyone that information. After a few minutes of haggling with her, I managed to extract the post office box address of "a friend" through which I could reach her, and she hurried away.

Upon my return home, I wrote the woman at that address. My letter came back marked "Addressee unknown." However, shortly afterwards I received a phone call from a man who said he knew the woman in question, and he gave me a telephone number which proved to be correct. I finally reached Grace's prize example—much to her surprise—and found that she was apparently willing to cooperate.

She gave me the name of her current doctor, whom I contacted. He assured me that the original diagnosis had been made by a reputable physician. The subject was believed to have a hepatoma (primary liver cancer), which does not usually respond well to chemotherapy, but the subject was given such treatment for six months. About one person in five reacts favorably to this treatment, and this subject possibly did, since she was apparently free of symptoms of the hepatoma for four years after the first diagnosis. According to her doctor, the fact that she reacted this way was "fairly amazing."

But this woman is far from cured. Even before she was diagnosed as having the hepatoma, she had sarcoidosis, a "not generally malignant" liver condition but one that can be fatal. It is a chronic disease, and this woman is still being treated for it. When I asked her physician whether there was anything miraculous about her apparently improved condition, he told me: "I don't think faith-healing has got anything to do with how she's doing right now."

When she was asked by Dr. Gary Posner, a physician who has traced many of these cases for me, to supply him with her medi-

cal records, which she said were at her home, she balked at sending them. She said she *might* send that material after she had an examination by her doctor the next month. When it did not arrive, Posner called to ask about the status of her case. She said that her appointment with her doctor had been postponed, and she questioned Posner about why he wanted her records, though the reason was quite evident and had been made known to her. She also, strangely enough, did not want her association with DiBiccari to be mentioned in this book. She said she did not credit DiBiccari with having cured her, but believes that her own prayers did the job. From someone who was willing to stand before a TV audience of hundreds of thousands of people with Grace at her side and declare her miracle, this attitude needed explaining.

Questioned by me about how the miracle claimed by DiBiccari was supposed to have taken place, this woman admitted that she hadn't even spoken to the healer at the service she attended. Amazing Grace walked past her as she sat. Grace never even made an *attempt* to heal this woman, yet raved about her success.

As we go to press, months after having asked for the medical records to establish the case, we still have not received them, though the woman continues to say that she "might" send them.

#### Six More Failed Examples

Reporter Doug Margeson, of the *Bellevue* (Washington) *Journal-American*, had no better luck finding anyone healed by DiBiccari. He attended a huge meeting in the Seattle Center Arena, where this colorful performer failed dramatically in every case he was able to record. He made a list of those she treated.

(1) Kendal Walker, from Tacoma, Washington, was paralyzed from the waist down as the result of a 1978 accident. Grace said he was cured. He is the same now as he was then.

(2) Carolyn Rogala, of Seattle, had her ankle crushed in 1980 and still suffers severe pain. After Grace ministered to her, there was no change.

(3) Gladys Chase suffers from osteoporosis and arthritis, was touched by Grace, "felt better," but left wondering if the feeling would last.

(4) Gloria French, a tiny woman from Tacoma, had pain in her knees. Grace made no change in her condition. In fact, Grace declared that Mrs. French had been in a wheelchair for ten years, which Mrs. French later denied. "I tried to explain that to Grace," she said, "but she kept insisting."

questions leads to doubt. Doubt leads to loss of faith. Loss of faith leads to loss of paradise. Thus, curiosity is a tool of Satan.

It is well to note that Popoff's original broadcast of that miraculous "healing" had superimposed on the screen the phrase "A True Word of Knowledge" as the preacher was calling out the information relayed to him by his secret electronic "ear." The evidence we developed against this claim was not seen by that TV audience, nor are they likely ever to know of it. How many times can we come up with evidence that proves the case against him? And how many times *must* we do it before someone in authority acts to stop it?

#### A Nonexistent Tumor "Cured" by Peter Popoff

In his August 17, 1986, TV broadcast, Peter Popoff made a startling healing claim. That is, it would have been startling if it had been true. Briefly, he showed a little girl from Tampa, Florida, who, he said, had been afflicted with severe migraine headaches, the result of an "inoperable, malignant brain-stem tumor" that he said had been confirmed by two CT scans at Tampa General Hospital as well as by doctors at the University of South Florida and at Johns Hopkins University. A CT scan with a "dark mass" was shown to the TV audience. Said Popoff: "There is no radiation, no chemotherapy, no surgery will help."

Miracle time. The girl's grandmother, Popoff said, mailed in a prayer request, and several weeks later the tumor had "disappeared"! That statement, it seemed, was made by the grandmother herself on the Popoff program. What better evidence could we ask for?

#### The Bare Facts

Dr. Gary P. Posner is a prominent consultant to both the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and the Faith-Healing Investigation Project of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion. He resides and practices in St. Petersburg, and both the medical records and the physicians involved in this case were available to him. His research of the matter provided somewhat different facts than those claimed by Popoff and his cohorts.

(1) It was *not* the little girl's grandmother's voice on the Popoff show making the statement about the cure, but that of another (unidentified) woman.

(2) The Popoff broadcast was made without the knowledge or permission of the girl's mother.

(3) The case had been resolved *two years before* Popoff chose to broadcast it. Had the girl actually had such a brain tumor, she would surely have succumbed to it long ago, barring a miracle.

(4) No cure took place. This little girl still suffers from the same severe migraine headaches.

(5) The CT scan was *not* of the "brain-stem" area at all.

(6) The "dark mass" in the CT scan that was used by Popoff was determined by the radiologists to have been simply an artifact (imperfection) of the scanning process, and it did not show up in the second scan, as erroneously reported on Popoff's show. Nor did any of the little girl's doctors suspect a tumor on clinical grounds.

Popoff's TV audience never heard the facts about this case, only the invented miracle that he claimed to have brought about.

### A Simple Challenge, Unanswered

Following my first accusations on the CNN broadcast, but before the blow I delivered on the Johnny Carson show, Popoff appealed to his TV viewers to send him healing testimonials to support his divine pretensions. Then he claimed to have received 200,000 replies from satisfied customers. I wrote to him and suggested that he choose at random any *five* of those testimonials and submit them to an independent, neutral medical board for evaluation. He ignored my suggestion. Why? Because, I believe, he knows full well what the results would be. He has attempted to respond to the criticisms and exposures that we have accomplished. He has utterly failed and has proved that he was unprepared for our onslaught. He floundered around, embarrassed and beleaguered, and those who care to know the truth now have it available to them.

The claims made by faith-healers are nothing more than hollow boasts and do not stand up to examination. Prepared culturally to expect miracles, convinced they are helpless without supernatural intervention, and bullied into supporting their gurus far beyond their means, the pathetic victims of the healers have become a disillusioned subculture playing a dangerous game. "The Healing Show," with its cruel lies, vain promises, and glittering trickery, has blinded them to reality and removed them from productive society. They are the dupes of clever, glib, highly organized swindlers who are immune from justice and are confidently aware of that fact.