

EXPERIENCES OF SPIRITUALISM.

BEING anxious to investigate phenomena of the class termed spiritual, I recently accepted an invitation from a lady in London to witness a *séance* at her house. This lady had courteously endeavoured to arrange everything in such a manner that we should enjoy the most favourable opportunity of seeing and hearing whatever was to be heard and seen. The *séance* had been preceded the evening before by a dinner at her house, at which those who were afterwards to sit together (excepting the mediums) were present; this being, as she explained, a necessary condition to "harmonise" the circle. Harmonisation having thus been effected, the *séance* itself was appointed for the next day, the 29th November, at 8.30 P.M. Our own party consisted of my wife, a friend, Mr. S., and myself. The other members of the circle were the hostess herself, her daughter-in-law (a widow), a Professor, so far of Spiritualistic tendencies as to believe himself the recipient of written communications from some external agency, a gentleman who is a complete Spiritualist, and three female mediums. The hostess I may name Mrs. G., the thorough believer Mr. N., while the three mediums may be designated as Mrs. H., D., and B. The medium-power in the room, being as three to ten, was therefore very strong; while of the remaining seven persons two were already convinced, and one was prepared to be so by previous experiences. There remained four unbelievers, ourselves and the younger Mrs. G., afterwards alluded to as "Mary."

The first business was to arrange the circle in due order. This was done according to instructions received from the spirits in the morning. By herself, with a considerable space around her, sat Mrs. H., the medium. The rest were so placed as to form a horse-shoe. First, nearest Mrs. H., sat Mr. N., the believer, then our hostess, then the Professor, then the younger Mrs. G., afterwards myself, my wife, and Mr. S., the horse-shoe concluding with the two remaining mediums. A long trumpet was deposited in the middle. At our side of the horse-shoe the chairs were close together, and no one could pass between them; but at the opposite side there was an open space which enabled two of the mediums to get up and move about conveniently (if they wished it) in the darkness which ensued. For the next step was to exclude every ray of light. The fires had been let out; and the lights were now extinguished. A slight chink in a window-curtain, which caused great uneasiness to the mediums, was at length closed after some trouble in finding it. Our next duty was a somewhat tedious one. The spirits required us to sing; and we

were told that they would probably join in our songs. Some very lugubrious spiritualistic hymns were accordingly sung very much out of tune by two of the party, but we were told that if more voices did not join it was useless. At this depressing stage, I proposed that we should strike up, "We won't go home till morning," or some other jovial song. The suggestion was at once accepted by the mediums, who said that this description of music would do quite as well. Another hymn, however, was sung first, and then followed two Scotch airs. The spirits, however, did not lend us any assistance. At last the terms exacted of us had been fulfilled, and a faint whispering sound was soon heard near Mrs. G., which she at once declared to be her son. The sound appeared to come through the trumpet, which we had been previously informed the spirits used in their conversations with the living. Mrs. G. at once began to converse with her son's spirit in an eager tone, with many epithets of endearment, "my boy," "my darling," etc. Her darling had very little to tell her, and one of his communications, "I was called L., after my father's friend L.," was of a kind which he need scarcely have troubled himself to make to his mother. His widow was present for the first time at a *séance*, and he was told by his mother that Mary was there. The reply to this was, "A cloud has passed from me," and then "Mary, have you no word for me?" was whispered out. But as Mary gave no encouragement, this spirit soon desisted. Mrs. H. next saw a fair young girl standing by my wife, and this little spirit attempted to give its name. Many faint and inaudible whispers occurred in the attempt. At last the Professor, who requested the spirit to speak to him, made out "Agnes Mary." What surname? we inquired. A long period of indistinct whispering was ended by our suggesting, rather than hearing, the name of Russell. A question as to the age in which she lived was answered, "the seventeenth century," and we were further informed that she was a daughter of William, Lord Russell, who had died young, and had kindly undertaken the guardianship of my wife twelve years ago. Agnes Mary now paid her the dubious compliment of saying that she would become a very powerful medium, and declared herself ready to communicate the means, which, however, she never did. Repeated inquiries as to the precise date of her death and place of interment remained unanswered. Indeed, all attempts to bring the spirits down from the vague generalities in which they apparently delight to exact statements on matters of fact had the singular effect of reducing them to silence, or leading them to whisper in such a manner that the words were inaudible.

Agnes Mary having retired from the scene, after proving unable to give the name of a child over whom she declared that she was watching, Mrs. H. saw the names of Plato and Socrates written over

the Professor's head, and not only this, but Socrates in person was perceived by her standing near him. Asked to describe him, she represented him as clothed in a flowing robe, with a high brow, with a pleasant appearance, and of commanding figure, above the middle height. Persistent questions from us as to the nose were at first unanswered, but at last elicited the reply that it was a straight Grecian nose. "It is not Socrates, then," said Mr. N., the believer, who had the advantage over the mediums of being well educated. But here another medium took up the tale, and declared that he was stretching out his arm with an angry and commanding look, saying that he *was* Socrates. This name had indeed been given through the trumpet, and the medium was certain it was the right one. Unfortunately I suggested that Socrates should prove his identity—as yet not quite clearly established—by speaking to us in Greek. Strange to say, the innocent proposal had the effect of entirely shutting the mouth of this otherwise loquacious philosopher, and in spite of several inquiries respectfully addressed to him as to what he thought of Grote's History or of his Plato—to which we did not exact Greek answers—not a word more could be got out of him. Mrs. H. now took care to explain that the spirit might have taken the name of Socrates merely because he belonged to his circle, according to a common but most inconvenient habit in the spirit-world. We asked if no spirit was near Mr. S., and a voice whispered, "George S." What relation? Uncle. Mr. S. said that he had had an uncle of this name, and inquired what occupation he had followed, to which an answer that was very wide of the mark indeed was returned. Having further asked if his father was with him, he received an affirmative answer, but on requesting his uncle to give his father's Christian name, a mere inaudible whisper, often repeated, was all the reply he could obtain. He then put a question on a point about which he himself was ignorant, namely, whether a female relation, whom he had lost sight of, was alive or dead. No answer. Mrs. H. said that the spirits did not recognise any such thing as death; they only knew of persons being in the spirit-world. The question was accordingly framed thus: "Is she in this world or the spirit-world?" A loud answer was immediately given, "Not dead," but the next query, "Where is she?" elicited no response. Now the answer "not dead" was a strange one, after the medium's explicit statement that the spirits knew nothing of death; but its perfect propriety was revealed to us when our hostess observed that although she might be in the spirit-world, yet other spirits would still call her "not dead." Thus the answer was correct in either alternative. Another spirit—that of a young lady—was seen near Mr. S., and he brought out by leading questions the facts that her hair was light brown, and that one eyelid drooped. No sooner had he mentioned

the drooping eyelid than Mrs. G.—who also saw her—exclaimed, “I was just going to say one eye drooped,” and I daresay that lady’s lively imagination actually enabled her to see what was described *after* the description. These few specimens are sufficient to indicate the general character of the dark *séance*. It is not necessary to particularise the numerous spirits who were seen round about us by the mediums, nor to dwell on the touches felt by some of the party. Nor is it possible to recollect how often, after successive failures to obtain any impressive result, we were told that “the conditions were not favourable,” that the spirits could not “gather up the conditions,” that it was with the greatest difficulty they spoke at all on this occasion, though on others the voices were distinct and loud. If only we would come again it would be different. It was Mrs. H.’s first *séance* in that room; how could anything more be expected?

The darkness was at length terminated. One of the mediums had endeavoured to bring it to a close long before, by saying that she heard the spirits say “slate-writing.” This effort to escape further exposure was passed by in silence at the time, but now we were told that the spirits might perhaps be pleased to write. This, we were assured, was a most satisfactory manifestation, as the writing was completely “independent” (*i.e.*, the medium had nothing to do with it). There could be no possible suspicion of fraud here. This at any rate was consoling. The slate was to be put under a table, and would there receive the writing. My satisfaction was, however, a little checked when a small cover, which only concealed the top of the table, was removed and a large one, extending to its feet, substituted for it; and when the medium’s arm from the elbow was inserted under it in such a manner as completely to baffle observation. My humble inquiry whether I might watch her hand was almost angrily answered in the negative. The spirits, it was said, must have complete darkness to write in. Even this condition when granted led only to the words “we cannot come” being written, and that after the medium had sat about half-an-hour, part of the time unwatched by us. Meantime the other medium, Mrs. D., had professed herself a physician, gifted with intuitive powers of discovering and healing maladies. She could see into our physical condition through all integuments. Proceeding to exercise her power she thought she could see certain traces of ill-health in me, and on my showing great interest in her statement, she was with the utmost ease led on by a few guiding questions to find distinct evidences of a disease I had never had, and of an operation I had never suffered. Intuition did not tell her—as it would have told a woman of moderate quickness—that I was fooling her. Neither did her insight stand her in better stead with Mr. S., about whom she was equally in error. At length she threw herself into

an affected trance, which was watched with great solemnity by Mrs. G., and pronounced a short discourse, beginning "We are come to say," on Mr. S.'s health, and the treatment it required.

Before proceeding to a few general remarks, I may observe that I have conscientiously endeavoured to qualify myself for speaking on this subject, both by attending other *séances* and by collecting information from believers. The other *séances*—four in number—have been singularly barren of results. The first was with Mr. Forster, specially recommended by American spiritualists, at his own house at New York. Spirits appeared readily enough, but all their answers were utterly and absurdly wrong. Nay, I was even favoured with a visit from the spirit of a heroine of fiction, for having written down both the name of a deceased relation and of Diana Vernon, it was the latter who appeared, and was stated by Mr. Forster to be quite ready to communicate. Again, I paid a visit during the present year to a lady in England, who is declared by other spiritualists to be the very head-centre of their body; a lady who sees visions, sees writing in the air, reveals the secrets of people's past lives, and is in all respects a most powerful medium. The entertainment she provided for us was in full lamplight. Raps certainly occurred; but the sole instance in which they led to any interesting result was when the name of a friend who had been dead about ten years was spelt out backwards. Believing that the medium had been ignorant of my acquaintance with the person thus named, I was at first surprised at the occurrence, especially as I could not see whence the raps emanated, the table being bare and the medium apparently unconcerned. But when shortly afterwards I discovered that she had been perfectly well acquainted with my friend's father the mystery was solved; and the solution was the more complete because certain test-questions I had put had been unanswered, while others of a general character had elicited distinct raps in reply. Moreover, when I had proceeded to more specific inquiries—the answers to which could not be in the medium's mind—I had soon been informed that "the spirit was exhausted," and could rap no more.

Another attempt, on the 2nd December, was at least successful in furnishing a specimen of the kind of manifestations by which spiritualists are concerned. After sitting in total darkness under the mediumship of a young Scotchwoman for an hour or more, the table at which we sat—not a heavy one—began to move and to tilt, always from the end at which the medium sat. When this had been continued to the extremity of tedium, one of ourselves tilted the table in such a manner as to rap out the names of two long-departed ancestors. The trick—confessed immediately after the restoration of light—was accepted by two spiritualists

present as perfectly satisfactory proof of the presence of minds other than our own. At another *séance*, which took place shortly before the one first described, the mediums were two gentlemen who had recently acquired mediumship, and whose honesty is evinced by the fact that in spite of our sitting for two hours round a table no phenomena whatever presented themselves. They themselves were the first to confess the failure, but urged that many sittings with the same circle were necessary to success. Thus, one of them informed me that I ought to sit continuously for three days with the lady in whose house I had heard the raps.

Spiritual manifestations are, in fact, like wills-of-the-wisp, which elude the pursuer the more provokingly, the more he chases them. He is always told that the most marvellous phenomena happened yesterday, or in another room, or under other conditions, or with a circle differently composed, or when the medium was in better health; but to-day, in this room, under these conditions, with this circle, they persistently refuse to show themselves. Thus, it is almost a hopeless task to subject them to any rigorous investigation. Mediums are never without excuse. Generally speaking, they are out of health; and, indeed, it is impossible to move among spiritualistic circles without continually hearing of their sufferings from exhaustion and debility, so that on medical grounds at least there is abundant reason for leaving the spirits to their own world. And, then, there is the ever-ready plea of "lying spirits" whenever gross and palpable errors are committed.

Among the few remarks which these facts suggest, the first—no doubt a trite one, yet indispensable—has reference to the extraordinary credulity of the spiritualists. Not only do they greedily accept jugglery as manifestations of spirits, but jugglery of the most vulgar order at once imposes on them. The three mediums at the *séance* described were far, indeed, from being ingenious deceivers. Clever women, with the favourable conditions they enjoyed—a dark room and a circle whose names were known to them—could have done far better. But the spiritualistic mind falls a victim to the most patent frauds. Whispers, heard in a room from which every ray of light has been shut out, are to them a convincing proof of the presence of spirits. Raps, which can easily be produced by human agency, are at once conceived to emanate from our disembodied friends. Tiltings of tables, on which a number of human hands have been placed, are supposed to convey messages from exalted intelligences, without a pretence of inquiry whether such tiltings might not occur even among strictly honourable people by unintentional movements; to say nothing of imposture.

But another and less obvious inference is that of the extraordinary credulity of the mediums. Mr. Herbert Spencer has noticed the

usual co-existence of the credulous and the lying disposition, and his view is confirmed by the characteristics of this class. Looking for certain dispositions and modes of behaviour among their audiences, they are at once thrown off their guard when met by experimental tests. Indeed, these artless creatures can be led by any one who can command his countenance to commit themselves, or rather the spirits, to any propositions he pleases to suggest. We have seen how readily Mr. Forster summoned Diana Vernon from the vasty deep. Now, during all the *séance*, this eminent medium was endeavouring to guess at our past histories—what relations we had lost, what country we were of, and so forth; and had any of his very numerous guesses been right, had we betrayed emotion at the presence of any one of the spirits he saw, he would have gone on, guided by our interest, to further particulars about them. So it was at the dark *séance* above described. I have said that the communications were begun by whispers which no one could understand. Let but any anxious spiritualist, catching at these sibilant sounds, translate them into the name of a dear friend and ask “Is it so and so?” he will be told it is, and will no doubt receive unspeakably comforting revelations. But let the careful inquirer suggest an imaginary name, and proceed to add to this name imaginary attributes, and the “manifestation” will come quite as readily at his bidding. There is little fear, provided that he simulates sufficient interest, of the mediums detecting him. Their intelligence is but slightly above that of their dupes. Lay a trap for them, and they will straightway fall into it.

It is no doubt because they are not thus tested, because imaginative persons go with open hearts and eager ears, and suggest nothing to the mediums but what is true, that we have so many stories—some from credible persons—of the astonishing information, on matters supposed to be quite unknown to the mediums, which they have received from the spirit-world. Nothing results more clearly from an examination of these alleged marvels than the extreme untrustworthiness of evidence, even when not given by untrustworthy persons. A slight change, an incidental omission, a failure to take *all* the circumstances into account, may completely deprive us of the clue to an alleged supramundane event. Imagine, for example, that the report of the *séance* above described had emanated from spiritualistic sources. We should have had the whole category of spirit-voices, spirit-touches, spirit-lights, and appearances of spirits themselves; while it would no doubt have been added that communications were made which could not possibly be known to the mediums. Indeed, the last point was actually urged by Mrs. G. in opposition to our scepticism, and that, notwithstanding the fact that one of the three had been in constant communication with her for

some time past. Another illustration will show still more plainly the facility with which facts are perverted by foregone conclusions. It rests on the authority of a gentleman who happens to combine accuracy with spiritualism. A certain medium professed his intention of writing under spirit-influence. He asked this gentleman to bring him a pencil and paper. The pencil was brought, and the gentleman went to fetch a sheet of paper, turning his back on the medium. On his return from another portion of the room he saw the pencil fall to the ground, and the medium with his arms upstretched, and his eyes fixed upon the ceiling. On looking upwards he discovered the name "Samuel" written on the ceiling. The medium had then been staying three weeks in the house. Now what was the spiritualistic version of this simple occurrence, derived from another source? That the medium while holding a pencil, had it suddenly snatched out of his hands; that it was carried aloft by unseen influence, and that after writing "Samuel" it descended to the ground. The all-important fact of the medium's long residence in the house was omitted, not from deliberate untruthfulness, but from absence of any suspicion of trickery. And when one at first sight unaccountable marvel thus vanishes into nothing under the withering touch of literal exactness, how many others might not share a similar fate if we could subject them to a like investigation?

Nor is this true only of the modern wonders alleged by spiritualists; it applies equally to the ancient wonders alleged by other authorities. Finding, as we do, that positive falsehood is still rampant, that credulous acceptance of fantastic theories and unsifted statements is still prevalent, that the most improbable events are believed on the smallest possible evidence, how can it be reasonably doubted that similar causes must have produced similar effects in former ages? Not to dwell, as is often done, on the more scientific character of our own age—for experience shows that the spread of scientific knowledge may fail to shake unscientific habits of thought—it is sufficient to urge that the totally undisciplined minds of bygone races were not likely to furnish evidence of a more trustworthy nature than that now offered by men constantly subjected to the critical spirit of our age. It is hard to understand,—or would be hard were not flagrant incongruities so common—how the same individuals can reject with scorn the statements of spiritualists, yet receive with faith the equally incredible statements which form part of their religious creed. Evidence offered by many witnesses, whose names are known, who have positively seen what they describe, who may be personally questioned, whose untruths, if any, may be detected, they do not even deem worthy of examination. Evidence offered by single witnesses, whose names are unknown or doubtful, who are beyond the reach of all inquiry, whose untruths, if any,

there are no means of detecting, they believe even without examination. To assert that a lady floats in the air is ridiculous; to assert that a man walked on the water is quite credible. To believe that spirits return to us is a sign of folly; to believe that after actual death human beings were restored to life is rational religion. Angels might descend to converse with prophets; spirits cannot descend to converse with their dearest friends. That a table should be moved in some inexplicable way is not to be believed; that a sea or a river should be cleft in twain is not to be doubted. It might almost be maintained that the readiness with which the public accepts the marvellous and the inexplicable, varies directly as it is ill-attested. For not only is the testimony offered by spiritualists immeasurably stronger, both in kind and in amount, than that on which the orthodox miracles repose, but it conforms far more closely to scientific conditions, being offered in order to prove, not exceptional prodigies, wrought by exceptional men, in opposition to the laws of nature, but phenomena of every-day occurrence, subject to their own laws, which, if not fully ascertained, are no less constant than those of the material world. The Churchman says, "extraordinary events happened once, under conditions that will never recur." The spiritualist says, "extraordinary events happen daily, under certain conditions, and will always happen when those conditions are fulfilled." Any argument, then, that is used against the latter, tells with hundredfold force against the former.¹

Wrong as the spiritualist may be, he yet offers something which science may take hold of and investigate. And, putting the professional mediums with their transparent trickery out of the question, there remains much which is deserving of such investigation. Mesmerism and its attendant phenomena, such as the power of one person's will over another, automatic muscular movements, the writing of words or phrases unexpected or unthought of by the writer, are alleged phenomena which, if true, may be expected to repay a careful study. Nothing can be more unphilosophical than the offhand rejection of all testimony relating to this class of facts, merely because they do not fall within the limits of our every-day experience. We have not yet explored every corner of the universe, nor do we know what surprises may still be in store for us. There is a line between phenomena contrary to our experience, and phenomena beyond it, though the line may not be always easy to discover. For instance, when we are told of human bodies floating unsupported in the air, the assertion is irreconcilable with a well-known law, and the probabilities are infinite in favour of mendacity or delusion on the part of the relator. But when we hear of one person being able,

(1) See the obverse of this ingeniously argued in an excellent little book, by M. P., "Hints for the Evidences of Spiritualism."

without word or gesture, to control the actions of another, this alleged fact, though it may lie beyond our personal experience, is not in direct contradiction to it. Again, though most people when writing, consciously direct their pens, there is no positive conflict with ascertained law if some people write without that direction. Whether they be true or not—a question which I will leave *sub judice*—the evidences of unsuspected witnesses to such occurrences may fairly cause us to suspend our judgment. He who should decline to do so might with equal propriety disbelieve somnambulism because he has never himself seen a somnambulist.

No doubt it is most unfortunate for the cause of impartial investigation that all such things have become almost irrevocably mixed up with the spiritualistic creed. A double obstacle to the ascertainment of truth is thus created. Rational men are indisposed to look into evidence presented by those who betray such hopeless inability to discriminate between adequate and inadequate proof of facts, between unintelligible realities and commonplace imposture. And, as a further difficulty, attention is directed to the wrong quarter; under the names of spirit-writing and clairvoyance there is established a pretended intercourse with other spheres, and instead of seeking for further instruction on human psychology, we are encouraged to look for revelations from a higher order of beings. That a subject so pursued should yield no scientific results is not to be wondered at. Not direct enlightenment, in the form of instructions otherwise unattainable by the mind of man, but indirect enlightenment, in the form of new facts concerning human nature leading to enlarged philosophic theories, is the consequence legitimately to be expected from experiments of this kind; while it is an indispensable condition that those who conduct them should be as free as the constitution of the mind permits from theories formed apart from facts, that they should be influenced neither by professional interest nor by desire to astonish, and that they should scrupulously guard against bias, either favourable or unfavourable to any given results of their inquiries.

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