

CHAPTER VII.

PUBLIC MEETINGS.

“IT is perfection itself; nothing could be more satisfactory,” exclaimed a friend when he saw the cage which had been brought home remodelled according to Thomson’s order.

“Yes, it is perfect, and I am quite confident that nobody could get out if once fairly locked in,” said the maker, who was present, and who had been informed of the future destiny of his handiwork.

Several friends came in during the day to see the latest development for medium testing, and they all expressed their entire belief in its power to prevent the escape of any would-be erring medium.

Thomson and I had made every arrangement with the proprietor of the hall, and others, whose services we needed to carry on our meetings. We had still a day at our disposal before the opening night, and this interval Thomson considered, might be well utilized to develop the power, and one night, when our visitors had all gone, we began the course.

Thomson went into the cage and Louey and I sat in the outer room, where we observed precisely the same order as if strangers were present.

“There are many things I want to tell you,” said Asoka when he had come out from the cabinet, “and as we are now alone I can teach you a few useful lessons. First, you are much too anxious to please everybody. You must be sterner. There is too much time spent in inventing tests; and as the medium can’t speak, being asleep in the cabinet, you must act, and forbid such folly. Suspicion and Spiritualism cannot co-exist. And again, there is Mr Goodman

who doesn't like the idea of these public meetings, and he is trying to dissuade you from them. He is a very good man, but does not understand us. You must take no notice of his sermons, but be guided wholly by us. The meetings will be grand successes if you are wise; we will do our share and you must do yours. When the medium is in the cabinet you must allow no one to approach him. After the meeting the cage may be examined by anybody."

"Don't you think, Asoka, that it would be a wise step to ask the Editor of the *Magazine* to be chairman."

"No, certainly not! Have nothing to do with any party. If you invite his assistance you will offend better people who belong to other parties. And then he will be fussy and important and spoil everything. I repeat that you must be guided by our instructions; but for the present I must say farewell—and remember."

We had several of these developing meetings, at all of which I was strongly enjoined to obey none but the guides. One of these séances and the last, was held late one night at the hall by way of rehearsal, in order to see if the place were properly darkened, but the measures we had taken to exclude every ray of light, particularly those from a troublesome full moon, were complete, and we found that our labour left nothing to be desired.

At last arrived the momentous night, and we opened the proceedings to a tolerably good and extremely friendly audience, with a bright and sparkling little concert, under the leadership of one of our devoted friends who, for the artistic skill he displayed, was rewarded with a well deserved notice of approval from the leading fashionable journal.

At the end of a short lecture which I delivered, and to which the audience respectfully listened, Thomson himself came forward, and it was easy to see that the concert and lecture were only listened to under a sort of mental protest. The whole interest was centred in the medium, and amid breathless silence, I locked him in the cage, and then, having taken a seat in the front row in the audience before the

platform, I gave the signal and the lights were, lowered almost to extinction.

The strong suspense under which I now laboured was almost unendurable. I hoped and prayed for success, but spite of all the assurances of the spirit I was horribly afraid of a failure.

I knew that the greater portion of the audience would condone a lack of power, but those who were not spiritualists, would not care to understand, much less excuse it; I had firmly resolved to return the money in case of non-success, but it was not that which troubled me. I did not care to contemplate the many jeers and gibes of those over-wiseacres, who prophesied all sorts of mischief from our daring attempt to show forth the power of spirit in public.

Our musical conductor, like everybody else, had to vacate the platform at this period, and as the piano was there and music was an absolute necessity, he tried to evoke melody from the bowels of a wheezy old organ, which stood in a corner. He contrived to extract many unearthly groans from the crazy machine which, for lack of better, did duty for music.

“Turn out the lights,” said Joey from the cabinet. Our eyes had become almost sufficiently used to the gloom to see everything in the place, but when, in obedience to that mandate, utter darkness prevailed, and we were, of course, unable to see, and our ears too being assailed by the yells and moans of the organ our sense of hearing was as useless as our optics.

Presently, during a lull in the storm produced by the organ, we heard a rustling, and soon a tall weird form was dimly visible, glowing with a faint light.

Curiosity to see the form was as powerful in the mind of our excellent organist as in our own; I was thankful that he too was not a machine, and, curiosity assisting, we were permitted to view the wonder in silence.

The appearance advanced to the front of the platform, and waved aloft a bright streak of light, and also allowed us who were near him to handle the object.

There was not, as some thought, the least sign of phosphorus, nor indeed of any other chemical with which we were acquainted. Close examination proved it to be as we had decided, a long strip of cloth material brilliantly illuminated. I had been promised, as a reward for obedience, that the spirits would materialise a whole garment of the like gorgeous appearance, and seeing this so freely displayed, I felt confidence in those promises. For about ten minutes, during the deepest silence, the form moved about solemnly waving the shining length, and then it slowly and mysteriously disappeared behind the curtains where the cage was fixed in a recess of the wall at the back of the platform.

“Music, please,” again said Joey. It was unavoidable, we must endure the affliction, and off again started the organ on its horrifying mission until, happy release, Joey informed me that the séance was ended.

Our organist was truly glad to escape from his post, and now that the spirit’s command no longer operated to fasten him to the stool, no inducement would compel him to play out the audience; and with a firm resolve I rushed to his vacated position and after many labours extracted, a little at a time, the notes of the old hundredth which frightened the audience out of the building.

When everybody had solemnly filed out of the place, Thomson, who during my unorpheus-like performance on the unruly instrument, had been round to the front of the house to speak to several friends, now came back and said—

“I have seen Colonel Fairfield, and he wishes us to go and give a séance with the cage at his house to a party of friends.”

“He is satisfied then? When are we to go?”

“To-morrow night. He is quite delighted, and so were several other friends I have seen. I told you we should do well. It’s all right; but we must manage to dismiss the audience a little better the next time, that organ is enough to give them the nightmare.”

“I don't know what to do, because you know the piano is moved away after the first part, and it is almost impossible to get at it.”

“You must make a speech. What did that man want round at the dressing-room? I thought he was a detective.”

“Oh he was in a mesmeric sleep, and said I had sent for him; which I never did,” I vowed.

This referred to a man who had been controlled during the evening in the hall, and which had necessitated his removal, as the spirit which moved him became very violent. Some malicious people said he was under the control of spirits from the neighbouring tavern. Neither was he the only one upon whose organism the spirits acted; several clairvoyant and clairaudient mediums were present, and they saw many forms moving about amongst us speaking of our great enterprise, and encouraging us by words of wisdom and actions of grace, which they repeated for our edifications. One person declared to six spirits out upon the platform at one time, and also saw a mighty spirit by my side when I was delivering the lecture. But as those phenomena are only objective to the medium himself, they were not precisely the kind of manifestation we required. As for myself, I was consoled with the reflection that if we had not achieved a high victory, neither had we suffered a defeat; and this was sufficient to save us from the derision of the enemy.

The next evening we drove with our cage to Colonel Fairfield, who had a party of his friends to meet us. Some of them were dreadfully sceptical, and insisted upon the cage being secured by tapes and seals in such a way that left no possible loophole for escape, even if the medium wished to do so. I was not at all displeased with the rigidity of these tests, and I offered no objection. Thomson had instructed me never to oppose tests at a private house, for those people paid high and had a right to demand anything short of that which might entail physical suffering or degradation; and any objection would be almost an equiva-

lent to an admission of guilt ; besides it mattered not the least to us, for if the application of tests should by chance generate suspicion, and so hinder or destroy the power, the blame of failure would rest, not with us, but with those who engaged our services.

Before using the cage, we sat down to the table for physical manifestations, but nothing occurred beyond a slight touch of one of the strings of the guitar, which was lying on the table, and a few raps, which gave us to understand that the power was being reserved for the materialisations, and we soon fastened the medium in the cage, which stood in a room adjoining to, and separated only by a curtain from that in which we sat.

“I do not like to sit with suspicious people,” said Lady Ellin, “for they always spoil the séances with their tests, which after all are only meant to show off a little cleverness.”

If everybody were as pure and ingenuous as this lady, tests would certainly be unknown, but she was assuming that nobody would condescend to wrong another.

“I think tests may be used with advantage, and without evincing any particularly abnormal amount of suspicion,” rejoined a gentleman.

“Quite right, quite right !” called out Joey from the other room. “We don’t object to tests, but unfortunately the time you wasted to-night over the tests has weakened the power, and I am afraid nothing can be done, but we are trying hard, very, very hard.”

“Are the conditions all right, Joey ?”

“No ; there is too much light coming in through the window, but don’t trouble about it now. You must be more careful another time.”

I was sorry to hear this, for a personal reason : the colonel blamed me for the omission ; he considered that it was my business to look after those things, and I don’t believe he has forgiven me to this day for that oversight. I really blamed myself more than he did, and determined to take a lesson from this occurrence.

“Why is the presence of light so injurious?” asked a lady.

“Because the atoms that we have to collect, with which to build up the form, are dispersed by its decomposing action.”

“Do try and come, dear spirits,” implored another of the company.

“I am afraid we cannot do anything to-night. Have you any questions to ask?”

“No; it would please us better if you were to come out to us, but as you say you cannot, it is of no use to ask.”

“Not a bit; you must have another séance, and I will come then. Good-night.”

Our gallant host consoled himself with the remark that these miscarriages were sure signs of the truth of Spiritualism, because, if it were trickery, there would be no such thing as failure, for no one ever heard of a prestidigitateur failing to perform his programme.

As it was quite clear we should get nothing, there was no further necessity to prolong the sitting, and we went and let loose the prisoner, who came smiling from his place of confinement, and apparently quite oblivious of the failure.

A few nights afterwards again found us at the hall for the second meeting, but as it was very cold and snowing hard, our audience was of the scantiest description, and unfortunately they were nearly all visitors with free tickets.

The proceedings were merely repetitions of the first, with the exception of an accident which seriously alarmed me. At the end of the meeting, when I went upon the platform to release Thomson, I saw the bottom lock was hanging down unfastened! I felt confident that it was not so at the beginning, and I could not in any manner account for it. But I did not then stop long to consider; I quickly hid up the offending object from inquisitive and unfriendly eyes, and no one else saw it.

I did not, in my own mind, blame Thomson, but thought

that the power was weak, and that the spirits, to obviate the disgrace of a failure, had unlocked the cage and brought him out in a magnetic sleep to personate a spirit, and had, unfortunately, neglected to secure the last lock. This view of the case was strengthened, when I remembered that during the course of the materialisations, my ears, which were preternaturally quick, had heard, ominous as a death-knell, a sharp click !

I told Thomson of this later on, when we were alone, but he shifted the blame upon me, and declared that it was my carelessness or nervousness. I proposed that it might perhaps be prudent to invite two gentlemen from the audience to act as referees. But this met with a decided opposition, for he averred that such a thing would immediately reduce us to the level of conjurors, and that the rest of the audience would promptly declare that the referees were in league with us, and it would infallibly induce disorder.

He asserted that an audience is always more orderly if kept at a respectful distance, but he severely censured my culpable negligence anent the lock, for if I had not been quick to cover up my own folly, we should have been branded as cheats and nearly ruined.

This did not at all satisfy me, but I exonerated him, and thought that he was anxious to screen the spirits, and lay the blame upon me.

We did not hold any more public meetings for some time, and for this I was pleased, as our friend Mr Goodman had been offended at our "making a show of Spiritualism," independently of the extreme danger of the proceeding and the consequent disgrace of a possible *exposé*, through the inability of the public to understand the higher phases of Spiritualism ; but I had disregarded his earnest warning, and considered that I must at all hazard obey my spiritual guides.

It would occupy too much space, and require too much of the reader's patience, were I to record every séance which we gave at this time. I must confine myself to a description of those of principal note.

One morning we received a telegram, with a prepaid answer, from a gentleman living near Grosvenor Square, inquiring if it would be convenient for us to give a séance to himself and a party of his friends the same evening.

As the time was convenient, and did not interfere with our other arrangements, we sent back an affirmative reply, and a few hours later we ourselves followed, and were very kindly received by our telegraphic correspondents.

“Now, Mr Thomson,” said our client, “I want to know if you will allow me to use a certain test, which I have specially invented for this séance? Not that I doubt your honesty, but I wish to be able to speak confidently of this to my sceptical friends.”

“I will submit with pleasure to any test you may choose to employ, providing it does not entail personal suffering, or place me in a degrading position.”

“Oh! this test won’t do anything of the kind; see here, I have had strong leathern belts made, one to be locked tightly round the body, and the others to be fixed to that, and locked, and then carried to the bars of the stove, and then also locked. We all consider this is stringent enough to satisfy any reasonable mind, and we are convinced if, with this test, we see the form, it won’t be you.”

Thomson was quickly fastened in this eccentric manner, and we seated ourselves in the next room; every light was of course extinguished, and the usual harmony from the musical box was soon given off to assist the power.

Presently Joey commenced speaking on the other side of the curtain, and we asked him what he wanted.

“Nothing. Asoka says he is afraid to come out, as the power is not good. Go out! go out! you have plenty of strength.”

This latter was addressed to a fellow-spirit, who answered in heavy tones—

“Yes! I can go now, but watch carefully that the power current is maintained, and that the medium does not fall over.”

“Good evening, Asoka,” we called out.

“All hail, all hail!” and the curtains were lifted, and we saw the colossal image, which addressed us so freely when invisible, but never speaking a word when before us, and only stood with weird and solemn gesture, waving his right arm, and pointing upwards.

We had no difficulty in discerning all this, for the illuminated band was placed around and descending from the shoulders, and in the front of the turban was fixed a shining glowing light, while in his hand he carried the bright mirror, which, when he held near to his own face, enabled us to see his features—apparently those of an Oriental, as such he claimed to be.

“May I shake you by the hand?” respectfully implored one of the circle.

In answer the form stepped forward, raised its arm, and flung back the gauzy material enveloping it, and with a stern grace which almost appalled us, stretched forth its right hand, which the questioner tremblingly took.

“Why, it feels as warm and natural as human flesh! but the hand is much larger than that of the medium,” exclaimed he, and then the hand was withdrawn, and the form itself slowly retreated until it stood in the opening of the curtain, when it again solemnly raised its hand, and holding the mirror aloft waved it thrice, and then that disappeared from view, while the dazzling white form seemed as if dissolving before our eyes, until only a speck remained, and that also quickly vanished.

“Are you satisfied?” cried Joey from inside.

“Yes, perfectly,” replied our host, “and many, many thanks.”

“I will try and come now if you will wait a little longer,” returned Joey.

“Yes, do please, we shall be delighted to see you.”

“All right, keep the music going, and I will try.”

We waited for several minutes to see the little black spirit boy, and then he mournfully announced! “Ah, the

power is too much used up by Asoka, and there is none left for me. I cannot come now, but you must have another séance, and I will try then. Good night, and God bless you."

"Good-night, Joey! good-night!"

Everybody expressed their entire satisfaction with the result of the test; there was not the least appearance of dishonesty, and the unhesitating manner which had been exhibited in submitting to the restriction, increased its moral effect and greatly strengthened our reputation.