

THE FACTS AND HYPOTHESES OF SPIRITUALISM.

PROBABLY the generality of our readers are little aware of the magnitude of the actual and potential importance of the questions which arise in connexion with the subject indicated by the above title. If the matter is mentioned in the circles in which we generally move, it is usually received with more or less of derision, and the scoffers are often disposed to pride themselves on a scepticism which they euphemistically describe as common sense. They will admit, however, that facts are stubborn things. & In saying this I by no means intend to imply the admission that all or any of the alleged phenomena asserted by professed spiritualists do really occur; I will leave that for the present. The stubborn fact to which I now refer is that millions of people in America and thousands around us at home do thoroughly believe in them, and, moreover, prove their faith, as all professed believers do not, by taking it with them as a factor in their practical life. Further, they not only believe in the occurrence of these phenomena as physical facts, but they fully accept the hypothesis which ascribes them to operation of discarnate spirits; or, rather, they do more than this—they regard this explanation as no longer of the nature of an hypothesis, and class it among the number of established facts. Nor can it for a moment be said that those who entertain such convictions are gathered mainly from a class of less than average intelligence: quite the contrary is the case. You could easily fill the largest hall in London with holders of the faith of spiritualism; and among them you would find Fellows of the Royal Society, university professors, literary men and women of the

highest standing, and numerous members of every learned profession, not excluding the Church. For many years a Society has been growing and gathering strength in our midst, one of whose principal objects is to pursue and encourage the study of the whole subject. This Society, which, though at first obstinately sceptical, has recently, in effect, endorsed many of the most astonishing assertions of the spiritualists, numbers amongst its members scores of the most distinguished names of the day, and is represented in almost every civilised country. It is true there are a few purists who profess to be exponents of the most rigid scientific orthodoxy, who persistently refuse to listen to or look at any evidence bearing on the question. On the other hand, after many years' acquaintance with the progress of this enquiry, I do not know of a single instance in which a man, of whatever capacity, has fairly faced the phenomena and honestly examined them, without being entirely convinced of their reality. There are wide differences amongst investigators as to their causes, but as to their actual occurrence they are agreed. I may refer, as one of the most recent illustrations of this, to a meeting held at Westminster Townhall on October 26, 1894, whereat Professor Oliver Lodge, F.R.S., D.Sc., personally testified (*inter alia*) to such facts as these: That, when the medium's hands and feet were perfectly secured, he had had his hand grasped by an invisible but distinct feeling bare hand, giving a clear impression of a thumb, a finger, and of nails; that he had seen a large hand and other vaguer moving objects outlined against a dim light; that he had seen a chair, with no one near it, move several times horizon-

tally, and also rise and knock the floor; that he had heard a heavy table, which no one was touching, move about many times, and then be turned bodily over, and subsequently found it, when light was introduced, inverted on the floor; that several times he had heard a musical box being wound up, at a distance varying from one to four feet from the thoroughly secured medium, and had heard, and dimly seen it, moving through the air, playing as it came, and had felt it deposited on his chest, and removed thence to the table, without contact; that he had heard raps on an untouched table, and once, not only raps, but hard bangs of excessive violence, as if made by a strongly wielded mallet or an abnormally strong hand.

Now, of course, if such testimony as this stood alone, no one need be surprised if an intelligent public received it, notwithstanding the distinguished position of the deponent, with the common "stuff and nonsense" formula; but corroborated as it is by a mass of contemporaneous testimony of quite equal cogency, and, as Mr. Andrew Lang has insisted, by the accumulated testimony of almost every literature and every age, it is idle and senseless to treat it with contempt. A German *savant* has, with respect to these very phenomena, declared that he would no longer call a disbeliever sceptical: he would call him simply ignorant.

Of course, viewed as merely physical occurrences, they do not specially concern the readers of these pages; and from that point of view no one can challenge the right of scientists to investigate their causes. But it seems that we have reached, or almost reached, a more advanced position than this. Many of the most prominent students of the subject not only assert with the utmost confidence that the facts are established, but take the further step of ascribing them, with almost equal confidence, to spiritual agency—to the operation of powers other than what are known as natural forces, and intelligence other than that of living human beings. If this be so, the whole subject begins to take a very serious religious aspect, and to

claim the attention of every religious teacher. As a matter of fact, it is well known that in America spiritualism is for millions of educated people a religion, and is constituted as a kind of Church. In England there exist several bodies, inconspicuous as yet, which nevertheless possess buildings registered as places of worship. To what does all this tend? This is a question which it is not unimportant, and which, I venture to think, it is not by any means premature to ask.

From one point of view it is obvious that the predicates of revealed religion receive from these phenomena a certain degree of confirmation. It has always proclaimed that we live in the midst of a spiritual as well as a material environment. Not only does it confidently teach that death is not the end of all human existence, and that it is far more important as marking the entry on a future life than as merely expressing the cessation of the life which now is, but further, it declares that the world and all that is therein is subject to the influence of spiritual creatures other than man, that it has been visited by angels who do God's pleasure and excel in strength, and also by demons malignant and hostile to God and man. Science has again and again sought to cast ridicule on these beliefs, and has never spoken with such boldness against them as in this age of aggressive materialistic thought. It is useless to deny that the faith of many has been shaken by the strong and emphatic dogmatism of these expositors of the phenomena of matter and force. We can consequently well understand the disposition on the part of many believers to welcome anything which has the appearance of a demonstration that mere materialism is insufficient to explain the facts around us, and which compels even those who ignore revelation and rely on observation and experiment alone as guides to truth to take account of incorporeal beings and hyperphysical powers. If, indeed, the matter rested there, we might perhaps acquiesce in this satisfaction. But the matter does not and will not rest there,

and the question rises whether we have not reason to say of this corroboration of spiritual religion so strangely reaching us, *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*. In this case, if not in Hamlet's, may there not be wisdom in Horatio's caution?—

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That beetles o'er his base into the sea,
And there assume some other horrible form,
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
And draw you into madness?

Let us for a moment accept hypothetically what the spiritualists believe respecting the phenomena in question. They assure us that they have abundant evidence, not only that spiritual beings and forces can be summoned into the midst of their circles by certain very simple modes of procedure, but that they are able in many cases, by a variety of means, to identify these beings as the spirits of their departed relations and friends. They give instances of the communication of knowledge which, they say, none but certain individuals could have possessed. They speak of recognising the faces and voices and touches and other more or less important idiosyncrasies of the deceased. We will not now dwell on the many and great *prima facie* difficulties which these assertions involve when viewed side by side with the teaching of revelation; we will pass by the inconceivable triviality, to use a mild expression, which characterises much, if not most, of the *post-mortem* conversation reported from *séances*; we may grant for argument's sake, if not compelled to grant altogether, that many of the communications made, whether by sight, sound, or touch, do proceed from intelligences other than those present and incarnate.³ But when everything is granted, where is the possibility of such identification as is claimed? This question is, under the circumstances, an all-important one to consider, because it is this very hope of and belief in identification which supplies to spiritualism the greater part of its attractiveness to those who venture on its shifty sands. The temptation, granting the facts,

is manifest enough. Who is there who has not in times of bereavement longed to follow the loved and lost within the veil, if only for a little space? or who has not at times yearned for the assured continuance after death of a sympathy which during life was felt to be one of its greatest treasures? In the absence, at any rate, of the highest confidence of religious faith, this desire still to know and communicate with the departed will always be powerful among men; and if there be any plausible reason set forth for believing in its possibility, we may be sure that many will hasten to attempt any means suggested for realising it.

But supposing, as we have said, all that the most credulous spiritualists assert as to the facts, how can we come within even a measurable distance of verifying our supposed identification? The whole hypothesis implies that we are surrounded by discarnate spirits which have power in certain conditions to make themselves manifest. But even if so, we are helpless when we attempt to realise the conditions of their existence. We have absolutely no means of ascertaining what sources of knowledge are available to them. Supposing, then, a "lying spirit" happen to be among them (and spiritualists themselves admit as much), how can we detect the imposture of such an one? The proof of personation amongst beings in the flesh is often difficult enough to tax the acuteness of lawyers; but where can we hope to find a personation agent qualified to expose the devices of a demon who wishes to pass itself off as a lost parent or child? It may possess a thousand means that we know nothing of for acquiring any amount of information respecting the deeds of the past or the doings of the present. It may have the power to assume by mere thought any form or similitude. If so, any attempt at test by observation or cross-examination becomes ridiculous. For aught we know or can possibly know, we may, when we suppose we are realising a long coveted reunion, be the very jest and flouting-stock of a company of fiends!

But perhaps some one will say, May we

not appeal for divine guidance and protection against such mockery and peril as this? May we? If so, I suppose that Scripture will assure us, and I have sometimes heard reference made in this connexion to 1 John iv. 1, wherein we are enjoined to "believe not every spirit," but to "try the spirits whether they are of God." I will not waste time by expending words to refute an exegesis so forced as would apply to the case in question a text which obviously has reference to false teachers thoroughly incarnate, not to say carnal, which were deceiving the Church when St. John addressed it. To rely on the apostle's test (see verses 2, 3) in the case we are now considering would or might be tantamount to naïvely taking the devil at his word. But though I believe this passage of Scripture has no relevance to the question, there are many others which have, and a curious exposition of some of them was recently suggested by an eminent scientist. In an address delivered at St. James's Hall a few months ago on spiritualism and science, Professor Barrett, of the Royal College of Science, Dublin, candidly admitted the kinship between modern spiritualism and ancient necromancy and other cognate practices emphatically condemned in Deuteronomy xviii. 10, 11, Leviticus xx. 27, and many similar passages. He ventured, however, to interpret these urgent commands by suggesting that in the then stage of religious and philosophical knowledge, the paramount aim of lawgivers and prophets was to fasten the thoughts of mankind on the great truths of the unity of God and the orderly government of the universe, and that all excursions into the more occult regions of science were at that time forbidden, lest they should distract the thoughts of mankind from the primary or more elementary lessons which it was necessary for it first to learn. He would have us believe that these practices were condemned not as evil in themselves, but as temporarily inopportune. It is interesting and significant thus to find an eminent scientific teacher so far recognising the importance of Scripture as to deem it necessary

to take account of its precepts. For this, perhaps, we are indebted to the fact already noticed, that spiritualism has shaken the purely materialistic conceptions of the universe which have for a generation and more so strongly influenced philosophic thought. But when we consider the proposed exegesis on its merits, can we do other than, while conceding to it a certain degree of ingenuity, characterise it as being in substance the merest special pleading? It is not so much a reading of the sense of Scripture as the reading of a sense into Scripture—a practice adopted, as we know, on another occasion by a very high authority in the spirit world whom we are emphatically commanded to resist. It is but fair, however, to add that the lecturer admitted that we have in the New Testament as well as in the Old very serious warnings against a merely prurient dabbling with the practices in question.

It is more than doubtful then, whether we are entitled to claim divine assistance, or, in other words, to ask God's blessing on any inquisitive researches in the region of the unseen. And if there be any doubt on the matter, it can scarcely be denied that there is danger in it. But though this practical conclusion commends itself for the guidance of the many who, if they ventured on the investigation, would surely do so for purposes and on methods the reverse of scientific, it by no means follows that we are called upon to denounce or discourage the labours of those who are coldly and patiently devoting great diligence to the examination of the facts of the case. It is the function of science to seek the causes of phenomena. Granting the truth of the startling statements already referred to, it cannot be said that anything amounting to proof that they owe their origin to spiritual agency has as yet been forthcoming. The words of the late Professor de Morgan respecting them are as true to-day as when they were written more than thirty years ago. After expressing his unqualified conviction in the actuality of the facts, precisely such facts as those which Professor Lodge describes, he adds: "I find

I cannot adopt any explanation which has yet been suggested. If I were to choose among things that I can conceive, I should say that there is some sort of action of some combination of will, intellect, and physical power which is not that of any of the human beings present. Yet thinking it very likely that the universe may contain a few agencies—say half a million—about which no man knows anything, I cannot but suspect that a small proportion of these agencies—say, five thousand—may be severally competent to the production of all the phenomena, or may be quite up to the task among them. The physical explanations I have seen are easy, but miserably insufficient; the spiritual hypothesis is sufficient, but ponderously difficult. Time and thought will decide, the second asking the first for more results of trial.”

Conceivably we have as yet only very partially discovered the perfectly natural powers of human thought and human will. Possibly, therefore, we may see in these at present unexplained and sporadic occurrences

the beginnings of a new branch of perfectly natural philosophy. *Prima facie*, the scientific mind is bound so to regard them, and is only fulfilling its duty in applying all its powers of analysis to their elucidation. Therefore by all means let experts in psychology and physics do their best with the mass of perplexing material before them. But for the present, at least, I can only think that such experiments, like those in toxicology or with high explosives, are far better left alone by all save the few. And I do say that if by any means the conclusion is fairly reached that the phenomena are caused by powers other than those natural to living men, whether known or unknown to science, then true wisdom and sound religion advise all to leave them. I should be sorry to back the subtlety of the Royal or any Society against that of the devil and his angels, and would earnestly hope that any such contest may be shunned. Who can say but that there is still fruit on the “tree of knowledge” which it would be fatal for mankind to pluck and eat?

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