

'TILL DEATH US DO PART'

BY C. MAURICE DAVIES, M.A.

It is necessary, in order to tell my story, that I should be, at the outset, somewhat personal—somewhat egotistical, if you will. As I am going to be the hero of my own narrative, it is almost inevitable that such should be the case. I have tried to avoid it by dressing up the history in the third person, and telling it about somebody else; but it was no good. I had even thought at one time of interweaving a highly sentimental love-story as a subsidiary plot, and making the whole run through two or three volumes by means of judicious padding; but I find the interest always flags, unless I confine myself, as I now purpose doing, to the barest recital of facts.

When I was at the University, without being in any sense a 'fast' man—indeed, enjoying with most of that genus the reputation of a 'reading' man—I very studiously devoted my reading to everything but what was likely to be useful to me there and then. I dabbled in science, flirted with literature, and was wedded to music, applying myself only so far to the Classics as was necessary to ballast my magazine articles with Greek and Latin quotations, or occasionally to enable me to publish a few 'bits' of the classical authors in the unlikeliest forms of the vernacular. Mathematics I altogether eschewed as being far too demonstrable, too 'slow and sure,' for my then desultory state of mind. Consequently I need scarcely say I considerably disappointed the hopes of my *pater* and numerous admirers, who mistook my versatility for genius, and altogether thought me a sort of Admirable Crichton.

It was during my college career, and whilst I was working *pro tem.* in a psychological groove, that Mr. Home's reputed doings in Paris and at home made modern spiritualism a nine-days' wonder. This was, of course, exactly the thing to suit me—a short and easy cut at the solution of problems which had puzzled philosophers for ages. Spiritual problems were henceforth to be as capable of demonstration as mathematical ones, and a good deal more interesting. The condition of the departed was to be no longer a matter of speculation or revelation, but of purely scientific inquiry; and I the Bacon to inaugurate the *Novum Organum*. Without being, in the accepted sense of the words, a religious man—a 'Simeonite,' in the current slang of my set—I had, I believe, a vein of latent piety quite as fully developed as most young men close upon their majority. *Valeat tantum.* I really thought at first that, by the time I got my degree,

theology would be a fixed science, and modern spiritualism was to do the work. In a very short time there cropped-up upon my bookshelves the principal works of English and American spiritualists, with manuals of magnetism, and old high-priced rakish-looking volumes on occult science generally. I learnt to cast a nativity, swear by Andrew Jackson Davis, and puzzle myself and everybody else by discoursing of the Odic force. Contemporaneously my little round table commenced active gyrations, whilst a 'circle' assembled almost nightly in my rooms for 'manifestations,' which, when they did come, were very physical indeed. I am free to confess, however, the results were not great on academic ground. The 'circle' were apt to be irregular, and to be impatient if results did not come immediately to order. I attributed my failures at the time to two principal causes: 1st, the absence of the female element in our circle (my bedmaker having proved cantankerous, and shied at the first intimation of invisible agency); 2d, the fact that men would smoke when sitting, a practice which I fancied the 'intelligences' objected to.

In the first 'Long,' however, after my inoculation with the spiritualistic mania, I took all my books 'down' with me, and resolved to 'develop' somebody or something at the parsonage before long. I mentioned the matter very seriously—for I felt seriously—to my father, as he was plodding through his sermon for the following Sunday; but he took a line for which I was not quite prepared. Instead of pooh-poohing my facts, he readily admitted them; but considered the whole affair diabolical, and all assumed identity with the spirits of the defunct as the machinations of 'lying spirits.' This only gave a new impetus to my study. I had great respect for my father's opinion up to a certain point. I fancy now that point was where it coincided with mine.

'So you concede these manifestations are spiritual, sir?' I asked.

'Provided the facts be as you state them—and I have no time or inclination to go into the matter of testimony—decidedly yes. Spiritual because diabolical.'

With my stepmother, who was considerably younger than my father, I succeeded better. The subject was new to her, and helped to dispel the gloom of a country parsonage. Even the little children (for there was a second family) wrote beautiful moral sentiments in a genuine scrawl with the planchette. But none of these produced results sufficient to give them more than a very secondary place in my narrative. However, I had succeeded so far. From my sanctum *sous les toits* down through the drawing-room and into the servants' hall itself tables were spinning and sibyllic sentences rapped out or automatically written from morning to night.

Reversing the ordinary process of most 'experiences,' I was not

led on gently from mesmerism, or animal magnetism, to spiritualism, but plumped at once into spiritualism, and then left to work my way back to first principles *viâ* mesmerism.

From the first, be it understood, I had never been a red-hot enthusiast in the spiritualistic theory. Any orthodox 'spiritist' would have deemed me all along heretical. In fact, according to their tenets, I should always have been termed a sceptic. In the proper sense of the word an inquirer, I accepted that title; I was not, for instance, prepared to admit the 'spiritual' element as readily as my father did. My standard of belief, in fact, was the introduction to the book *From Matter to Spirit*, by Professor de Morgan, which treats the pneumatological theory only as easier than any of the psychological. It was thus I formulated my doctrines during the course of this vacation, and before the startling events of the present story occurred to shake it:

1. It is proved to demonstration that material substances can be rendered independent of the hitherto accepted 'laws of nature,' such as gravitation, &c., by human volition, with or without contact.

2. An intelligence which is not that of the medium is constantly found present at spirit circles.—N.B. Whether such intelligence is altogether independent of those surrounding the medium has not been proved to my satisfaction. I have of course read of instances where facts and events quite unknown to the persons present have been communicated; but I have had no experience of this myself.

3. The 'higher phenomena,' such as automatic writing, trance-speaking, and spirit-voice, are phases so easily simulated as to need much longer investigation than I have as yet been able to give them. It is only fair to add, that in the whole course of my investigation I have not been able to detect a single case of fraud.

This opinion, be it known, was strictly esoteric, being written in my private diary for my own edification. It was based on my experiences at college on a round of visits I had paid to the different professional *media* in London, and my brief experiments at the parsonage. Now came the test.

A governess had been engaged for the younger members of the family in the person of a tall raw-boned Scotch girl, externally about as unspiritual-looking a lady as could be imagined. She 'went in,' however, mildly—as became her position—for my experiments. She had lots of traditional stories of second-sight attaching to various members of her family, and was also inclined to argue the matter (as Sydney Smith says) 'in the *abstract*' at greater length than I cared. The servants, I afterwards found, had their own opinions as to why Miss M'Gorgon was so fond of sitting hand in hand with young master, and 'adored dark *séances*;' but such a suspicion never crossed my mind then, and I have no idea even now whether it had the slightest foundation in fact. Whatever other ghostly element

there may be in what I have to relate, there certainly is not the ghost of a love-story.

I came down from my sky parlour to the drawing-room latish one evening, and found my stepmamma and Miss M'Gorgon obviously boring one another from their easy-chairs at opposite sides of the fireplace. I had just been reading the Reverend Chauncey Hare Townshend's book on mesmerism, and the resemblance of Miss M'Gorgon's pose to one of the plates prompted me to say,

'Miss M'Gorgon, you look as though you were sitting to be magnetised. Will you let me experiment on you?'

'By all means, but I am sure you will not succeed.' And, to do her justice, her great Scotch eyes looked far too wide awake for any earthly power to shut.

After twenty minutes' manipulation, however, she was in a deep magnetic sleep. My stepmother was not at first quite inclined to accept as a conclusive fact that while Miss M'Gorgon was deaf to *her*, she responded readily to all my questions; but when she saw me stand up on Miss M'Gorgon's knees—I row over eleven stone, I should mention—she began to think that the laws of matter, even matter so material as the M'Gorgon shanks, were in a state of flux. But this was not all.

Some time before, the children had been ill with scarlet fever, and Miss M'Gorgon, in the course of her assiduous attention to them, took the disease. Being naturally of a somewhat hysterical temperament, she, as the ladies say, gave way a good deal; and after the malady had left her, whether as one of its manifold *sequelæ*, or a result of her hysterical tendency, she either could not, or fancied she could not, move her left arm. At any rate she did not use it in the slenderest degree possible, keeping it rigidly bent close to her side. My mother's astonishment may be imagined, then, when, at my command, Miss M'Gorgon assumed the attitude of the eagle-slayer, using the diseased member as the bow arm, and keeping it elevated in the most statuesque manner possible.

My father entered at this moment from his sermon-mongery, and dismissing a pardonable doubt as to Miss M'Gorgon's sanity, proceeded to examine the phenomenon.

On this and subsequent occasions all the ordinary phases of animal magnetism, including phreno-mesmerism and clairvoyance, were exhibited, and at last we had a specimen of that peculiar condition known as lucidity.

Miss M'Gorgon threw herself into an American chair, became pale and semi-rigid, exhibiting every appearance of death. Had I not been prepared by previous reading, my courage might have failed, and possibly disastrous consequences to the mind and even life of the 'patient' followed. As it was, I preserved my equanimity, and bade her describe her condition. She was basking, she said,

in light ineffable. Her only anxiety was to leave the body, and remain in that lucid state. The most curious part of the manifestation was, that she was utterly ignorant of the names of living persons. She readily remembered the dead, described herself as being with them, and exclaimed almost petulantly,

‘You know they are here! You are with me. Let me go to them. I can see them, if you will only let me.’

Her volition was utterly lost in mine. It seemed a strange link between spiritism and magnetism; but my mother began to look nervous, my father evidently smelt sulphur, and, in fact, I felt myself that I was trenching somewhat closely on the limits of the ‘knowable.’ Much against her wish—I was going to write ‘will,’ but that was in abeyance—I bade her come back; and after my using the ordinary method for dispersing the ‘magnetic aura,’ she returned to earth utterly ignorant of all that had taken place. That evening I formulated another ‘opinion’ in my diary:

‘Whatever be the power that seems, under certain conditions, to animate dead matter, and which, for lack of a better term, we call magnetism, that same power is capable of producing in the human frame a state of exaltation of the faculties which apparently lifts the patient into a higher condition of being.’

Having produced this lucid phase at a second *séance*, after I had taken some lessons of a professional mesmerist, I was induced to extract a promise from Miss M‘Gorgon—which I knew would be sacred if made in the magnetic state—that she would allow no one else to mesmerise her, and moreover that she would never resist my will. She even wrote it down in the blank page of my Reichenbach, and after having done so, said in a voice that startled us all,

‘I am yours—yours *till death us do part*.’

It was, I fancy, more the matrimonial than the magnetic import of this particular phrase that frightened us at the time. Mine most unmistakably, whether with views matrimonial or magnetic, she was from that day forth. She anticipated my every wish, even to such trivial matters as passing things at table, &c. Had Miss M‘Gorgon been young and beautiful, I do not know what I or other people might have thought of her attentions. As it was, nobody thought anything at all; and, for myself, I soon found out the unsatisfactory nature of the spiritualistic inquiry; and by the time October came, I was quite prepared to leave all my occult works behind for my father to elaborate a learned discourse on Beelzebub, whilst I devoted my attention to the subject of brass bands in general, and the big saxhorn in particular, in consequence of having been promoted to the dignity of a bandsman in the University Rifle Corps.

But I was not to dissociate myself so easily from Miss M‘Gorgon and spiritism.

Soon after I went ‘up,’ a change became visible in the governess.

She was nervous and excitable to the last degree. The servants chuckled, and asked one another, 'Hadn't they said so all along?' The partial paralysis of her arm, which had disappeared under magnetic treatment, reappeared, or was reassumed. She even simulated other affections, such as a violent cough, a weak ankle, &c. A medical man who was called in, and to whom my father confided the fact of the mesmeric experiments, traced these affections at once to their true source, a desire to be magnetised. The doctor decidedly recommended her not meeting me again; so an opportunity offering for getting her a more lucrative and less irksome position, as companion to an aged lady, Miss M'Gorgon was with some difficulty persuaded to make the change, having suddenly discovered an intense affection for the young ladies she had in charge at the parsonage. However, Miss M'Gorgon received her *congé*. The young ladies were sent to boarding-school, and Miss M'Gorgon and myself never met in the flesh again.

I strongly recommend any young lady who wishes to retain the affections of a swain not to allow herself to be mesmerised by him. On other and quite independent grounds, I would most seriously advise no female ever to submit herself to a power of which we know so little, except the one fact of its being open to fearful abuse. But especially with reference to young ladies in love, I may inform them that the fact of my having magnetised Miss M'Gorgon produced in me an irrepressible feeling of repulsion towards her. It was with the greatest delight I found we should not meet at the parsonage during the Christmas vacation.

Passing over one or two strange occurrences at college, such as noises and apparently automatic displacement of furniture in my rooms whilst I was 'consuming the midnight oil,' I come to this particular Christmas vacation. There had been a time when the mere possibility of watching the movements of a peripatetic easy-chair or a locomotive coalscuttle would have been irresistibly attractive to me; but now, without making me exactly nervous, it bored me. I always sheered off to bed directly the things began to get lively, without making any accurate examination as to whether it was not all fancy on my part. I instinctively associated the phenomenon with Miss M'Gorgon; and though there was nothing at all in the shape of an audible voice, the words were constantly and most vividly impressed on my mind—'Till death us do part.' Whenever any disturbance of the kind occurred, I seemed to keep on saying over and over again these words to myself. I would even recite propositions in Euclid, or speeches of Shakespeare; but beneath them all, like an undercurrent, came those hideous words of that horrible woman, 'Till death us do part—Till death us do part.' I even went so far as to pay a most unusual visit to a medical man. I told him nothing of Miss M'Gorgon or mesmerism, but mentioned

the 'movables' in my room, &c. He simply laughed, told me to shut up my books and leave them behind me, go 'down,' and take lots of exercise; all of which I faithfully obeyed.

On Christmas-eve I was regaling myself with a musical practice in my sky parlour, and certainly nothing was farther from my thoughts than Miss M'Gorgon or magnetism, when I was startled quite out of my serenity by hearing in the next room, which had been the M'Gorgon bedchamber, unmistakable 'thuds' of what I used to term irreverently the M'Gorgon 'beetle-crushers.' There was no mistake about it. Somebody or something was walking up and down the next room with that most martial and inimitable tread.

I confess to being thoroughly frightened, and to making a summary retreat. To save my life I could not have opened the door of the M'Gorgon chamber, which I knew, or believed, to be locked and tenantless. I even had to pause a moment to get my breath and recover my equanimity before I entered the drawing-room.

'Come to the fire,' said my stepmother; 'you look fearfully cold. Why do you mope yourself in that attic of yours? In fact, now I look at you, you are worse than cold—you are ill and haggard. Do, pray, obey your doctors, and exchange books and music for exercise in the open air.'

I promised compliance; and my father, looking up from his *Guardian*, said,

'You will be sorry to hear your old "patient," Miss M'Gorgon, is very ill, and not expected to live.'

'I hope, sir, my patient does not attribute her ailment to my treatment.'

'No; I fancy it is only a reappearance of an old and hereditary pulmonary affection. I think you may make yourself easy on the score of your treatment, which, as far as I could see, extended only to the head and heart.'

'By the way,' I added, in a tone of assumed carelessness, sipping my tea as I asked, 'who occupies Miss M'Gorgon's room now?'

I was told, as I had expected, that the room had been locked ever since Miss M'Gorgon's departure. Indeed my mother showed me the key in her basket, asking me jokingly,

'She has not come back to claim her plighted spouse, has she — "Till death us do part"?' she added, in a hoarse voice like Miss M'Gorgon's.

I told them, as laughingly as I could, how I fancied I had heard the M'Gorgon 'thud' next me. I saw my father and mother exchange significant glances, as much as to say, 'He is nervous;' and a good drive across country was proposed next day.

I am ashamed to say how childishly afraid I was to go to bed that night. No infant in a dark room ever dreaded 'bogey' worse than did I that ponderous tread. Whilst I was spinning out the last

few minutes, with my candlestick in my hands, the very lamp on the table quivered, and the ornaments rattled on the mantelpiece, as the same dull heavy footstep resounded in the room above us, which had been the children's schoolroom. We all turned pale as ghosts ourselves, and my father and mother exclaimed at once,

‘Miss M‘Gorgon!’

As for me, I was speechless; and as I stood so, though I was quite sure no one else could hear a sound, the words seemed hissed into my ear, ‘Till death us do part.’

The usual examinations of the house were made; the servants all found to be quiet in bed, the room undisturbed, &c. The footsteps seemed to cross it but once, and we heard no more.

We agreed upon the customary explanation, which palpably satisfied none of us, that we ‘fancied’ we had heard what we were quite certain we did hear; and we parted for the night.

I dared not confess my cowardice, but I would have given anything to have had a companion for that night. In plain simple English, I went to bed in a terrible fright.

I tumbled in more expeditiously than ever I had in my life, and buried my head under the bedclothes, not daring to look out into the darkness. I fancy I was dozing off, when suddenly the bells of the little village church clashed out discordantly. I had forgotten all about its being ‘Christmas-day in the morning,’ and started up in bed, the more so on account of my nervousness from another source. It was utterly dark; but at the bottom of the bed there was *something*, palpable to some sense, analogous to that which had kept pealing through my ears those ominous words, ‘Till death us do part.’

The *something* which I thus saw, yet did not see, appeared like a tall scraggy luminous mass, with two intensely light spots about the place where eyes might have been expected. At the same time as I saw, yet did not see, this, I heard, in the same negative kind of way, the same loathsome words, as it were, drilled into my very ears, ‘Till death us do part.’ It could not have been common sight or common hearing, for in each of these cases time is necessary to impinge upon the senses; and as it was, I was down in bed again, buried deeper than ever, ‘like a shot,’ as we say. Turning my bedclothes, bolster, and pillows into a veritable sarcophagus, I managed to dull all external sights and sounds; even the clanging bells did not reach my ears; but still before my eyes was the *spectrum* of the ‘something’ I had seen; and a voice that seemed to grow more and more subjective—seemed, as it were, to retreat within the innermost chambers of consciousness—still repeated ‘Till death us do part. I promised to be yours till then; I have kept my promise. If you *dare* to doubt it, look at your watch in the morning, and remember the Christmas bells.’

After that, silence—but not sleep. Through that weary Christmas morning I never lost consciousness; nor did I emerge from my sarcophagus until the sound of a brass band under my window—the brass band I had ‘coached’ for the occasion—saluted my ears with an air I had myself selected as being not too secular-sounding for that sacred day, namely ‘Pestal.’ With what a new meaning the vocal chorus seemed to strike on my ear, the chorus I had meant only to be an effective slow march!

I jumped out of bed, let the welcome daylight in at the window, and waved my hand by way of compliment to my bucolic band down among the snow. I expected to feel ‘seedy,’ and did miss my night’s sleep a little; but a good ‘sluish’ in cold water soon got over this, and to my astonishment I felt better than I had done for months. A weight seemed removed from me. I had almost a difficulty in recalling the events of the past night, or the words that up to that time had caused me so much discomfort.

What was the time? I sought my watch on its usual hook at the head of my bed. It was not there! I could have sworn I hung it there on the previous night. After diligent searching I found it lying on the floor at the foot of the bed, and almost underneath it. It had stopped at about half-past twelve!

Whether this had anything to do with my luminous visitant, or whether in my fright I tumbled it down, and so stopped it, I do not pretend to determine. Had the event stood by itself, that would, of course, have been the natural explanation. Even the M‘Gorgon ‘thud,’ had I alone heard it, might have been attributed to anti-matrimonial views on my part towards the lady in question.

As to the poor girl herself, she troubled no one farther with her presence, matrimonial, magnetic, or otherwise. She became rapidly worse on Christmas-eve, and whilst the bells were beginning to chime in the Christmas morning passed away. Her last articulate words were, ‘Till death us do part,’ which of course the watchers attributed to a blighted love-dream of the poor governess. She continued murmuring for some time, and *at half-past twelve* died.

We did not hear of the event for some time, and I had carefully noted all the above particulars in my diary before the news reached me. When the letter arrived, I fetched the volume down, and laid it quietly open before my father. He read it very carefully, and from time to time compared it with the contents of the black-edged letter in his hand. At last he rose and returned me my manuscript, with the solitary remark, ‘A very strange coincidence!’ and so retired to his study—I have no doubt to append a side-note to his sermon on the being, nature, and attributes of Beelzebub.