

PROCEEDINGS OF THE GENERAL MEETING ON

Saturday, March 6, 1886.

The nineteenth General Meeting of the Society was held at the Rooms of the Society of British Artists, Suffolk Street, Pall Mall, on Saturday, March 6, 1886.

PROFESSOR SIDGWICK, VICE-PRESIDENT, IN THE CHAIR.

The following paper was read :—

II.

ON SOME PHYSICAL PHENOMENA, COMMONLY CALLED
SPIRITUALISTIC, WITNESSED BY THE AUTHOR.

By PROFESSOR W. F. BARRETT.

In the printed statement of the objects of this Society, one of the subjects which the Society was founded to investigate is described as follows :—"An inquiry into the various phenomena, commonly called 'Spiritualistic,' with an attempt to discover their causes and general laws."

Whether Spiritualism be regarded as worthy or unworthy of serious inquiry depends, to a large extent, upon the place where each person draws the boundary line that, in his opinion, divides the possible from the impossible. There are some things upon which it would be sheer folly for any intelligent man to waste his time, such as circle squaring, or a search for the perpetual motion. These and such like things are placed beyond the pale of rational investigation at the present day by the extent of our already existing knowledge in those particular regions. There are, however, other matters which appear impossible, not from the range of our knowledge, but from the *extent of our ignorance* in those directions. Under this class of improbable phenomena might be included such things as fireballs, the sea-serpent, thought-transference, and what is known by the name of Spiritualistic phenomena; a few years ago the telephone and the phonograph would also doubtless have been here included. The essential difference between the two classes of improbable events is that the first involves a contradiction of laws which investigation has well established, whilst the second involves no

contradiction, but only an extension of our knowledge in an unforeseen direction.

Forgetful of this broad distinction, some of our Members and Associates consider Spiritualism a subject so contemptible, because to them it is intrinsically impossible, that it ought not to have been included within the objects of our Society. I would venture to beg such of our friends to read the two masterly addresses which, as the first President, Professor H. Sidgwick delivered at the foundation of this Society, or Professor De Morgan's inimitable preface to a volume called *From Matter to Spirit*.

On the other hand some of our friends have gone to the other extreme, and vigorously express their opinion that the subject of Spiritualism should have occupied the first place in the programme of our operations. They urge that in importance and interest this subject surpasses all the other problems included within the scope of Psychical Research, and they complain that the Society has displayed far too great caution and reserve in dealing with a class of phenomena that has received the attestation of men of indubitable scientific repute, both at home and abroad. To such I have only to say that the Council of this Society recognised from the outset the interest that is attached to this question, and soon after the foundation of the Society a committee was organised for the purpose of investigating Spiritualistic phenomena. If no report of this Committee has been published, this has arisen not from any disregard of the importance of this subject on the part of the Council, but simply because the Committee itself has failed to make any report. I, for one, regret this omission, which no doubt arose from the Committee being unable to obtain any conclusive evidence. But I think it would have been better if a report, even of repeated non-success in obtaining trustworthy evidence, had been drawn up and duly presented to the Society. The failures of one generation are the stepping stones to success in the next, and in a subject so obscure and so full of pitfalls as that which goes under the name of Spiritualism, it is desirable that each investigator should state, with judicial fairness and scientific exactness, the conditions and the results of every experiment. Moreover, if the first instalment of evidence had been unfavourable to Spiritualism it would lead the public to have more confidence in the sincerity of purpose which animates us all, than if we only published evidence that told in favour of the marvellous.

I am aware that this is not the usual scientific method ; thousands of experiments are made which never see the light simply because they have a negative result as regards the particular object of search. It is not worth publishing these, for all that could be said would be that nothing has been found out that was not perfectly well known before. But

the psychological problem before us is of a different character. We cannot at pleasure command the instruments necessary for the inquiry, for they are living beings asserted to be comparatively few in number ; hence, whenever it is claimed that with such and such an instrument such and such results ensued, I think our primary duty is to obtain permission to submit the instrument to a rigid, though it should also be a perfectly courteous and friendly examination. If the results of an adequate examination of say one or two dozen such living instruments of note show that in no single instance do they exhibit any phenomena new to science, then I, for one, think that we should publish this negative evidence, and, leaving Spiritualism aside, pass on to other more profitable fields of inquiry. Conclusive evidence unfavourable to Spiritualism has not yet been made public by any competent body of investigators, or by any single authority.¹ The sorry stuff that in general passes as criticism of any unfamiliar psychological phenomenon can only be explained by the general hurry in which everybody lives, so that the critics have no time to investigate or even to read the evidence which they profess to criticise.

Experience shows that the real difficulty with Spiritualism is in arriving at sufficiently *conclusive* evidence pointing one way or the other. Non-professional instruments or mediums are difficult of access ; professional mediums—who make a living by their powers—are, very naturally, open to the charge of being conjurers in disguise, who can fail, without discredit, whenever they are too closely watched, and it is notorious how helpless an ordinary mortal is in the hands of a clever conjurer. But I think the difficulty of arriving at conclusive evidence has by some been over-estimated. Conjurers have not super-human skill. Let us obtain from the best authorities on conjuring the limits of what they deem possible in their art ; then if, after imposing our own private tests in our own private rooms, results are obtained which con-

¹ Since the foregoing was written Mrs. Sidgwick has read an account of her prolonged personal investigation into the physical phenomena of Spiritualism, and the conclusion arrived at is distinctly adverse to the genuineness of the phenomena she witnessed. But though Mrs. Sidgwick's adverse testimony is the most damaging blow which Spiritualism, or rather a certain class of Spiritualistic phenomena, has yet received, it will be noticed that Mrs. Sidgwick is careful to point out that her evidence is not conclusive of the whole question ; on the contrary, she expressly states, in the last paragraph of her able paper, that her own view is that “it is more probable than not that such things [that is the so-called Spiritualistic phenomena] do occasionally occur.” Every lover of truth must feel grateful to Mrs. Sidgwick for her laborious and valuable inquiry. At the same time one cannot but regret that some of the simpler physical phenomena, occurring with unpaid mediums, were not accessible to Mrs. Sidgwick. It is to be hoped that if any reader of this paper knows of the existence of such manifestations he will at once communicate with the Hon. Secretary of the S.P.R.

siderably surpass the limits of conjuring, and are otherwise inexplicable, we should be encouraged to persevere until a mass of evidence had been obtained commensurate with the very great antecedent improbability of the phenomena themselves. It is because I know much has already been done in this direction by men of high scientific position, such as, *e.g.*, the late Professor De Morgan, and Professor Zöllner, and Mr. Crookes, that I feel it is worth making a strenuous effort to obtain more evidence of the kind. Hence, at the risk of incurring scientific odium,—and I may add with much personal dislike to the subject itself—I feel it my duty to reiterate publicly my conviction that at any rate some of the simpler phenomena of Spiritualism are inexplicable by any causes at present recognised by science. The object of the present paper is to place on record some of the evidence upon which that conviction is based. I am not so foolish as to suppose anything I can say will make an appreciable difference in public opinion, or that my testimony is superior to, or ought to have more weight attached to it, than that of several other observers. But it will, I hope, lead some of our members and friends to come forward and inform us of any unexceptionable evidence they possess, until “we drive the objector into the position of being forced to admit the phenomena as inexplicable, at least by him, or to accuse the investigators either of lying, or of cheating, or of a blindness, or forgetfulness, incompatible with any intellectual condition except absolute idiocy.”

I freely admit that very much of what passes among some Spiritualists as evidence has really no claim at all to this distinction, except as being evidence of the difficulty of preserving a sound judgment when dealing with these phenomena. How far my *own* judgment is at fault is not for me to decide. It is impossible for anyone to be entirely free from mental bias, but so far as I can I have striven to be an impartial witness to phenomena coming within the scope of my own observation.

Reviewing the numerous public and private séances which I have attended with different private and professional mediums, during the last 15 years, I find that by far the larger part of the results obtained have absolutely no evidential value in favour of Spiritualism: either the condition of total darkness forbade any trustworthy conclusions, or the results were nothing more than could be explained by a low order of juggling. A few cases, however, stand out as exceptions; the ones I will cite occurred in the years 1875 and 1876. Though notes of the cases to be cited were taken at the time, the evidence is, I admit, fragmentary and somewhat remote in time. This partly arises from my lessened interest in the phenomena and partly from the difficulty of obtaining anything like satisfactory evidence. I should add, moreover, that moral considerations also weigh with me; owing to the constant

recrudescence of fraud on the part of many mediums with whom I sat, it became with me a doubtful question whether the gain to science was worth the moral risk to which one exposed the paid medium. The temptation to fraud on the part of the medium is of course very great, as must always be the case when a man's livelihood depends on the recurrence of phenomena which if genuine are out of his own control.

In the first two of the cases I am about to describe there was certainly no pecuniary inducement to fraud, as the sittings were with private family circles, and in none of the cases to be cited was there total darkness, that easy adjunct of fraud; furthermore, the phenomena occurring in all these cases were of so simple a character, the same thing being several times repeated, that one's attention was not distracted by the occurrence of various novel and unexpected results.

The first case I will describe came under my notice a year or two after I went to reside in Ireland. A solicitor, Mr. C., with his wife and family, had come to reside for the season in the suburban house of a friend and neighbour of mine, an Irish country gentleman, who had an utter disbelief in Spiritualism. I was, therefore, not a little amused, upon making Mr. C.'s acquaintance, to find that he had in his own family what appeared to be Spiritualistic phenomena actually then and there going on. When Mr. C. found I was interested in the matter, he kindly permitted me every opportunity of close and frequent investigation. The following observations, noted at the time, were in part published in a review I was then engaged in writing, and also referred to in the course of a paper which I read before the British Association at Glasgow, in 1876.¹ They embrace the record of numerous sittings, extending through the months of *August* and *September*, 1875. Present, besides myself, Mr. and Mrs. C. and their young daughter F., a bright, frank, and intelligent child then about ten years old. Time, 10 a.m. We sat at a large dining-room table facing the French windows, which let in a flood of sunlight, so that the sitters' feet as well as hands could be perfectly seen. Shortly a sort of scraping sound was heard on the surface of the table, the sound moving about, but was loudest when near the medium F. Raps were also heard, sometimes on the table, sometimes appearing to come on the backs of the chairs on which we sat. F.'s hands and feet were closely watched; they were absolutely motionless when the sounds were heard. After a few sittings the sounds grew in loudness, often being as loud as, and very much resembling, the hammering of small nails into a floor. They came more readily and more loudly when music was played, or a merry song struck up. Usually they kept time with the music, and altogether

¹ See *Proceedings S.P.R.* vol. 1, p. 238. *Digitized by Google*

displayed a singular degree of intelligence. Sometimes a loud rhythmic scraping, as of a violoncello bow on a piece of wood, would accompany the music. Again and again I placed my ear on the very spot on the table whence this rough fiddling appeared to proceed, and felt distinctly the rhythmic vibration of the table, but no tangible cause was visible either above or below the table. Experiments were made on the possibility of localising sounds such as were heard, and so far as my experiments went, I found that I could tell, approximately, the position where a knock was made by a friend hidden underneath a large table. The ability to localise a sound depends very much on the nature of the sound. The sounds made by a siren or by a singing flame are extremely difficult to localise, they may be anywhere about the room ; but I feel pretty confident that the knocks and scraping sounds proceeded from a source certainly within a foot or two of the position assigned. Now I noticed particularly that the sounds—though fainter, it is true, than when near—were sometimes heard far away from the medium. On one occasion, when no one else was in the room, and it was broad daylight as usual, I asked my young friend the medium to put her hands against the wall and see how far she could stretch her feet back from the wall without tumbling down. This she did, and whilst in this constrained position—with the muscles of the arms and legs all in tension—I asked for the knocks to come. Immediately a brisk pattering of raps followed my request. All the while the child remained quite motionless. My reason in making this experiment was to test the late Dr. Carpenter's muscular theory of the cause of the sounds. Had Dr. Carpenter been present, I feel sure he would have admitted that here, at any rate, that theory fell through. Besides knocks there were occasional movements of the furniture. Seated one day at a large dining-room table, in full sunlight, Florrie and Mr. and Mrs. C. and myself being present, all our fingers visibly resting on the surface of the table, three legs of the table rose off the ground to a sufficient height to allow me to put my foot easily beneath the castor nearest me. Attempts to move the table by muscular effort, under similar conditions, entirely failed ; it could be pushed about, not raised. On one occasion I asked that the knocks should come upon a small table, the medium being seated near to, but not touching the table. The sounds occurred as requested, and I placed one hand flat on the upper surface of the table, and the other on the under surface, and in this position I felt, or thought I felt, the slight jarring made by the taps on that part of the table enclosed between my hands. The sounds frequently occurred, as I have said, when the child was the only person present in the room besides myself. Under such conditions they occurred when I made her lie on a sofa and firmly held her hands and feet. On any occasion, upon repeating the alphabet, raps would occur

at certain letters. Thus I was told that a lad named "Walter Hussey" was the invisible person engaged in making the sounds.

Though there was manifest intelligence in the sounds, it was a childish intelligence, and a hasty observer might therefore jump to the conclusion that it was the little medium herself playing tricks; and he would find incidents which might give a plausible support to his conclusion. Thus one day a word was misspelt by raps, exactly as the child would have misspelt that word, as I afterwards ascertained. Yet I can only say that a long and careful examination convinced me that trickery on the part of the child was a more improbable hypothesis than that the sounds proceeded from some unknown agency.

Nor could the sounds be accounted for by trickery on the part of the servants in the house, for in addition to my careful inquiries on this point, Mr. C. informed me that he had obtained the raps on the handle of his umbrella out of doors, when the child was by his side, and that the music master complained of raps proceeding from inside the pianoforte whenever the child was listless or inattentive at her music lesson. Mrs. C. told me that almost every night she heard the raps by the bedside of her child when she went to bid her child good night; and that after she had left the room and partially closed the door, she would hear quite an animated conversation going on between her daughter and her invisible companion, the child rapidly spelling over the alphabet, and the raps occurring at the right letters, and the child thus obtaining, with surprising rapidity, a clue to the words spelt out.

Still more violently improbable is the supposition that the parents of the child were at the bottom of the mystery, stimulated by a desire to impress their friends with the wonderful but imaginary gifts their child possessed. The presence of the parents was *not* necessary for the occurrence of the sounds which, as I have said, often took place when I was the only person in the room besides the child.

Hallucination was the explanation which suggested itself to my own mind when first I heard of the phenomena, but was dismissed as wholly inapplicable after the first day's inquiry; nor do I think anyone could maintain that different people, individually and collectively, for some weeks thought they heard and saw a series of sounds and motions which had no objective existence.

No! I was then, and am still, morally certain that the phenomena had a real existence outside oneself, and that they were not produced by trickery or by known causes, hence I confess I could come to no other conclusion than that we had here a class of phenomena wholly new to science.¹ In reviewing the evidence the critic must, however, make what

¹ It may be urged that the occult phenomena alleged by the Theosophists were of this inexplicable character, and believed in by numbers of intelligent

allowance he thinks proper for my mental bias during the investigation, and further take into account the hypothesis that some children do exhibit an amazing passion for deceiving their elders, and some possess an extraordinary love of notoriety. For instance, I could a tragic tale unfold where these causes led a clever boy, in good position in society, and of juvenile piety, for twelve months to deceive his father, a distinguished surgeon, and all his family, by pretended Spiritualistic manifestations, which appeared at first sight inexplicable until the cunning trickery of the lad was discovered. But the two cases radically differ in this, that after examination by an outsider one case hopelessly broke down, the other did not. In the one case the phenomena were not beyond the capacity of a clever and wicked child, in the other the phenomena were, I venture to think, beyond the capacity even of the most clever and diabolical child. It was in assuming the goodness of their child that one family were misled ; no such assumption was made in the other case, for the parents sensibly enough punished their child when the phenomena first broke out.

After some three months the sounds disappeared as unexpectedly as they had arisen. Assuming Miss C. to be an accomplished trickster animated by the love of notoriety, one would not expect the phenomena to droop and die away when constant practice had made the trick easy, and when the acme of success, as regards the growing interest of friends and the attention paid to herself, was within the performer's reach.

In a letter which I received a few days ago from Mrs. C., she writes :—

Florrie has never had any return of her mediumship since 1875, when we were in Ireland. It died a sudden death there and then. I was not sorry for it, for I feared that had it continued when she was growing up, it would probably have developed more than we cared for or than was good for herself. Of the genuineness of the phenomena I have never had the slightest doubt, then or now.

And in a subsequent letter Mrs. C. gives her opinion which, though I do not agree with it, I quote :—

I have no doubt that the intelligence which manifested was outside the circle, and though my mere conviction on such a matter is, of course, quite valueless, I still believe it was a so-called "spirit" totally disconnected from ourselves, and dominating her for a time. The manifestations were often violent, and for the most part very frivolous in their nature. I thought

and honest men. Nevertheless, after Mr. Hodgson's investigation in India no other conclusion is possible but that the High Priestess of Theosophy, Madame Blavatsky—round whom these marvels clustered,—is one of the most "accomplished impostors in history." But what are the facts ? Directly circumspect and painstaking investigation was brought to bear upon these phenomena they were found to be fraudulent, and the mystery collapsed.

therefore they could bring no advantage to the sitters to counterbalance the disadvantage to my daughter, then a mere child and easily excited. Hence, when the phenomena ceased I was not sorry for it on her account.¹

The next case, which I will cite, is of somewhat less evidential value, as my opportunities for testing the phenomena under varying conditions were not so great ; but the case is of interest owing to the medium being a middle-aged lady in private life, who found this abnormal power gradually develop in her presence. In the spring of 1877, I was informed by a Mr. L., a well-known photographer in Dublin, that his cousin, Miss I., had mediumistic power, and I was invited to her house to make a careful investigation. I went a great many times during the spring and autumn of 1877, and took notes of what occurred. In moderate gaslight, enough to see to read small print, knocks and spasmodic movements of the table at which we sat occurred, and long religious messages were rapidly spelt out, sometimes by raps, sometimes by quick tilting of the table, which latter may, however, be disregarded, as it is impossible to eliminate the effects of unconscious muscular action except by a clear space intervening between the hands and the table, which was not the case here as a rule. I will quote the record of one séance on *May 10, 1877*. There were present only myself, Mr. L., and Miss I. The séance took place at Mr. L.'s house in the evening, one gaslight burning in the room. Seated at a small table, tiny raps soon occurred, like the ticking of a hard point on the oil cloth which covered the floor of the room. I confined my attention to these, and begged Miss I. to move to a larger and heavier table, some 4 feet square, and to adjust her dress so that I could see her feet. This she did. I sat close by her, carefully watching her feet and hands, which were however quite motionless.

Presently loud raps were given at this table beneath the hands of the sitters, so loud, in fact, they quite startled me. In character the sounds in general resembled the snapping noises occasionally made by furniture when the joints open under the heat of a room. But the sharpest and loudest cracks can be well imitated in strength and character by smartly striking a table with the edge of an ivory paper-knife. In obedience to my request a definite number of knocks were given : four double knocks were asked for and given ; knocks were asked to indicate the number of fingers held open, and were correctly given ; in two instances this was tried and correctly done

¹ Both Mr. and Mrs. C. were present when this paper was read. Mr. C. quite corroborated the opinion given by his wife of the genuineness of the phenomena, and informed me of several other remarkable phenomena, in connection with the mediumship of his daughter, which had not come under my notice.

when I held my hand out of sight, so that the opened fingers were known to no one but myself. Knocks of different kinds were now heard all over the table ; they kept time to the whistling of a tune, and showed an actuating intelligence that was most undeniable.

Addressing the table, I now asked if knocks could be given without the contact of the hand. Three knocks in reply were to be the signal for yes. Three knocks quickly came. The hands of both Mr. L. and Miss I. were now held up, and whilst they partially withdrew from the table, the knocks still came, not so vigorously, but still there they were. This went on for some minutes, till they ceased to be heard. A refresher was then given in the shape of a few moments' contact with the hands. Once more the knocks returned, and continued some time after the hands were removed.

Whilst noticing these facts, I observed a frequent uneasy movement of the entire table, and now it sidled about in a most surprising manner. Lifting their hands completely off the table, the sitters placed themselves back in their chairs with their hands folded across their chests ; their feet were in full view, and under these conditions, and in obedience to my request, the table raised the two legs nearest to me completely off the ground, some 8 or 10 inches, and thus suspended itself for a few moments. Again a similar act was performed on the other side. Next came a very unexpected occurrence. Whilst absolutely free from the contact of every person the table wriggled itself backward and forward, advancing towards the arm-chair in which I sat, and ultimately completely imprisoning me in my seat. During its progress it was followed by Mr. L. and Miss I., but they were at no time touching it, and occasionally were so distant that I could perceive a free space all round the table whilst it was still in motion. When thus under my very nose the table rose repeatedly, and enabled me to be perfectly sure by the evidence of touch that it was off the ground, and, further, that no human being, consciously or unconsciously, had any part in this movement.

This sitting lasted two and a-half hours altogether. The results, it is true, were very remarkable and unaccountable ; but though I had not the slightest doubt of the good faith of Mr. L. and Miss I., yet I do not adduce this evidence as unexceptionable. I should have preferred to have taken precautions which were not so easy to impose on a lady, and I should also have preferred to have had the séance in my own house. This latter objection was met by Mr. L. and Miss I. coming to my own house in the first week of September, 1877, and as before we three were the only persons present. The time was the afternoon, and there was plenty of daylight. Though the drawing-room was carpeted, the curious ticking sounds again occurred ; these soon developed into louder raps, always in the neighbourhood of the medium, but I could not discover

the slightest movement of the muscles of the hands or feet which would account for the sounds; nor were they muffled, but clear and distinct raps. There was always a remarkable intelligence and often a jocosity about the sounds, and when a tune was played on the piano the raps kept time to it. Suddenly, only the tips of our fingers being on the table, the heavy loo table at which we were sitting made a series of very violent prancing movements (which I could not imitate afterwards except by using both hands and all my strength); the blows were so heavy that I hurriedly stopped the performance, fearing for the safety of the gas chandelier in the room below.

Here, too, I cannot avoid the conclusion that the phenomena described are inexplicable on any known hypothesis. It is true the character of the pious platitudes spelt out by the table were just such as the medium herself (a Methodist) would be likely to concoct; and it was quite possible or even probable that unintentional muscular movements on her part caused the table to tilt and spell out these platitudes. Nor must we exclude from our view two considerations, first, how very difficult if not impossible it is to keep up a continuous vigilant watch on the hands and feet of any person—the whole of legerdemain is based upon this known failure in our habits of observation; and second (though there was no reason to suppose Miss I. was suffering from this malady), we must remember the extraordinary vagaries of hysteria: even experienced physicians have sometimes been led astray by the morbid and amazing cunning of patients suffering from this disease. But supposing that Miss I. had some ingenious mechanism concealed about her person whereby she could, by an imperceptible movement of her body, produce the sounds that were heard, this explanation would fail to account for the undoubted motion of a heavy table free from the contact of all present. After giving due weight to every known explanation, the phenomena remain inexplicable to me, but each reader will form his independent opinion, which will be so much the more valuable than mine as his knowledge is larger and his experience of these phenomena wider than mine.

With some hesitation I will now adduce a case of another order, namely, with a paid professional medium, who has since become well-known for his slate-writing performances, and who is therefore either an accomplished trickster or the possessor of most wonderful occult power. This is, therefore, a case wherein I should like to have had the co-operation and opinion of a good conjurer; I confess I distrust my own judgment. I will, however, endeavour to describe what occurred as faithfully as my notes of the performance admit. My principal reason for citing this case is that it affords an illustration of what appears to be utterly incomprehensible as a piece of trickery, and yet I cannot

conceal from myself the fact that if the moral character of the medium should be found open to suspicion the chances are that it was after all only a piece of adroit legerdemain.

On January 5th, 1878, Mr. Hensleigh Wedgwood kindly arranged that I should have a séance in his own house in Queen Anne Street, London, with Mr. Eglinton. The observers present beside myself were Mr. Wedgwood and his sister, Mr. A. R. Wallace, and Mr. F. W. H. Myers.

The séance was held in Mr. Wedgwood's library at the hour of 4 p.m. When the medium arrived I was permitted to take whatever precautions I thought necessary to prevent fraud on his part. Accordingly I asked him to take off his coat and waistcoat and put on a black coat of Mr. Wedgwood's. The description of what follows is tedious, but I fear it is necessary, though no verbal description can ever be entirely satisfactory to one who was not present. Anticipating that the medium might easily slip his arms out of the coat sleeves, but that he would find it extremely difficult to get them out of his shirt sleeves, I took a needle and thread and stitched each sleeve of the white shirt he had on to the corresponding sleeve of the coat I had just put on him. I then stitched the wristband of each shirt sleeve so as to make it fit tightly around his wrists. He was then asked to sit down in a chair in the corner of the room and place his hands behind him; in this position thread was tied to each wrist and fastened to a nail driven in the woodwork of the adjacent bookcase. To prevent accidental breaking of the thread, and as a further security, a piece of red tape was passed through the button hole of his shirt, then through a button hole of the coat, then carried over his arms and the two ends tied very securely behind him; the two long loose ends of the tape were finally fastened, one to the nail in the bookcase on his right hand, and the other to the nail in the bookcase on his left hand side. I now asked him to place his hands, which, as I have said, were behind him, palm to palm; he did so, and I then tied his thumbs together very securely with a piece of black linen thread. It will thus be obvious he could, if he chose, move his legs freely and also turn or nod his head, but he could not move the trunk of his body nor his hands nor arms without breaking the fastenings, which I may add were sealed with sealing wax on to the bookcase as well as tied to the nails. A couple of small curtains, running on a rail over the medium's head, were now drawn nearly together in front of the medium, leaving a space of a few inches exactly opposite the central line of his body. Through this space his face and front of his body could of course be seen. The curtains hung down on each side of the chair on which the medium sat, so that his legs from the waist downward were entirely in front of the curtain. A gas jet, which was the principal light in the room (the heavy window curtains having been

drawn) was now lowered, but there was plenty of light to allow of our seeing each other. We then seated ourselves close to the medium ; I was so close to him that not a foot intervened between us. I could see that his head presently drooped and he went into a sort of trance, whether real or assumed I could not say. Knockings were now heard, and upon repeating the alphabet over slowly, a message was spelt out. I asked, "Can you move anything in the room?" It said, by knocks, it would try, but nothing was moved. Either one of us or else the knocks suggested putting some objects near the medium. I got up, went to the bookcase, and took out some three or four books at random. These I placed in a pile on the lap of the medium, and then, catching sight of a small hand bell, added this on the top of all.

Upon seating myself close in front of the medium, our knees almost touching, I noticed there was enough light in the room to read the time by my watch true to a second. In a few minutes after this, whilst watching the motionless figure of the medium, I distinctly saw the upper half of the pile of books move, the cover of the middle book opening and causing the ones above it and the bell to incline to a considerable angle, so that I was surprised to find that the bell did not fall off; in fact, it did not stir relatively to the cover of the book. The leaves of the book were now dropped one after another, and then opened up again. Then the lower book opened, and its leaves were deliberately let fall. The whole proceeding was exactly such as would occur if two hands were placed on each side of the volumes and their leaves slowly run over by first lifting up the body of the book and then allowing the leaves to drop past, the fingers rubbing against them as they fell. During this process some unseen support would be required to keep the bell in its place.

Now, if the medium had skilfully depressed or raised his knees, the books would have moved as a whole, and this is what did *not* occur. If he had cunningly contrived, unseen by five pairs of eyes, to fasten a thread to the cover of any of the books, he must have done so in full view of us all after he had been secured in his chair, and then the upper cover, or the book as a whole, would have moved, and this also is what did *not* occur.

When the curtains were drawn back the medium appeared to be fast asleep ; the gas was turned fully up, and every fastening was found intact. As, however, I could see the body of the medium the whole time, the fastenings were of no particular value in this case, except to satisfy those who were not there. The medium presented the usual dazed appearance when he awoke shortly afterwards.

What hypothesis can we frame to account for what took place? If hallucination be the explanation it was a case of collective hallucination, for every one of the five observers present saw the same thing and

conceal from myself the fact that if the moral character of the medium should be found open to suspicion the chances are that it was after all only a piece of adroit legerdemain.

On January 5th, 1878, Mr. Hensleigh Wedgwood kindly arranged that I should have a séance in his own house in Queen Anne Street, London, with Mr. Eglinton. The observers present beside myself were Mr. Wedgwood and his sister, Mr. A. R. Wallace, and Mr. F. W. H. Myers.

The séance was held in Mr. Wedgwood's library at the hour of 4 p.m. When the medium arrived I was permitted to take whatever precautions I thought necessary to prevent fraud on his part. Accordingly I asked him to take off his coat and waistcoat and put on a black coat of Mr. Wedgwood's. The description of what follows is tedious, but I fear it is necessary, though no verbal description can ever be entirely satisfactory to one who was not present. Anticipating that the medium might easily slip his arms out of the coat sleeves, but that he would find it extremely difficult to get them out of his shirt sleeves, I took a needle and thread and stitched each sleeve of the white shirt he had on to the corresponding sleeve of the coat I had just put on him. I then stitched the wristband of each shirt sleeve so as to make it fit tightly around his wrists. He was then asked to sit down in a chair in the corner of the room and place his hands behind him; in this position thread was tied to each wrist and fastened to a nail driven in the woodwork of the adjacent bookcase. To prevent accidental breaking of the thread, and as a further security, a piece of red tape was passed through the button hole of his shirt, then through a button hole of the coat, then carried over his arms and the two ends tied very securely behind him; the two long loose ends of the tape were finally fastened, one to the nail in the bookcase on his right hand, and the other to the nail in the bookcase on his left hand side. I now asked him to place his hands, which, as I have said, were behind him, palm to palm; he did so, and I then tied his thumbs together very securely with a piece of black linen thread. It will thus be obvious he could, if he chose, move his legs freely and also turn or nod his head, but he could not move the trunk of his body nor his hands nor arms without breaking the fastenings, which I may add were sealed with sealing wax on to the bookcase as well as tied to the nails. A couple of small curtains, running on a rail over the medium's head, were now drawn nearly together in front of the medium, leaving a space of a few inches exactly opposite the central line of his body. Through this space his face and upper body could of course be seen. The curtains hung down on the chair on which the medium sat, so that his legs from below downward were entirely in front of the curtain. A gas lamp was the principal light in the room (the heavy window curtains being drawn).

drawn) was now lowered, but there was plenty of light to allow of seeing each other. We then seated ourselves close to the medium. He was so close to him that not a foot intervened between us. I could see that his head presently drooped and he went into a sort of trance, whether real or assumed I could not say. Knockings were now heard, and upon repeating the alphabet over slowly, a message was spoken. I asked, "Can you move anything in the room?" It said, by knocking, "I would try, but nothing was moved. Either one of us or the other knocks suggested putting some objects near the medium. I went to the bookcase, and took out some three or four books at a time. These I placed in a pile on the lap of the medium, and then, in sight of a small hand bell, added this on the top of all.

Upon seating myself close in front of the medium, our knees touching, I noticed there was enough light in the room to read by my watch true to a second. In a few minutes after this, while watching the motionless figure of the medium, I distinctly saw the upper half of the pile of books move, the cover of the middle book opening and causing the ones above it and the bell to incline at a considerable angle, so that I was surprised to find that the bell did not fall off; in fact, it did not stir relatively to the cover of the book. The leaves of the book were now dropped one after another, and then again. Then the lower book opened, and its leaves were deliberately allowed to fall. The whole proceeding was exactly such as would occur if the hands were placed on each side of the volumes and their leaves run over by first lifting up the body of the book and then allowing the leaves to drop past, the fingers rubbing against them. During this process some unseen support would be required to hold the bell in its place.

Now, if the medium had skilfully depressed or raised the books, the books would have moved as a whole, and this is what he did. If he had cunningly contrived, unseen by five pairs of eyes, a thread to the cover of any of the books, he must have had a clear view of us all after he had been secured in his chair. The upper cover of the book, however, would have moved, and what would have been the result?

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described it in similar words afterwards. The occurrence was not expected beforehand, not, therefore, talked over as likely to happen, and accordingly no dominant idea had taken possession of our minds that this particular phenomenon would occur. Moreover, I was specially on my guard, for the mesmeric hypothesis was a favourite one of mine, but in this case it is certainly out of court. If fraud be the explanation, who was the operator? The good faith of the observers, all friends of each other, is unquestionable; but if this were not the case it was quite light enough to see that nobody's hands were meddling with the books. The medium may have been the operator, but I cannot myself conjecture how he accomplished the performance, even allowing he may have distracted our attention at a critical moment so as to make his preparations unperceived. The most plausible explanation of the whole affair is mal-observation and misdescription on my part, a clever bit of juggling in moving the books being mistaken for a larger movement, and ultimately exaggerated into the effect described. I have however quoted from my notes and am not conscious of any exaggeration. But I think we are bound to admit that if such an inexplicable physical phenomenon stood alone it is far more probable that my observation was inaccurate or my description exaggerated than that the occurrence actually took place as I have described.¹

The question remains how far is it legitimate to apply this exaggeration hypothesis to each case as it arises and so in detail dispose of an imposing array of evidence. When the first observers of a slowly moving electric fire-ball recounted what they had seen they were naturally suspected of exaggeration, or as the victims of some illusion. But as concordant testimony from other independent observers came in disbelief had to be given up, and electric fire-balls are now accepted as an enigmatic freak of that inexplicable agency, electricity.

Similarly, if we had adequate evidence, physical phenomena, such

¹ I ought here to mention that I have had numerous sittings with "Dr. Slade" and Mr. Eglinton, and other mediums, for the purpose of obtaining what are called "Psychographic" phenomena, that is, writing by unseen agency on slates or other material. Whilst I was very much impressed with the successful results that I had with Slade in broad daylight and under conditions that seemed to render fraud impossible (and until I am shown how the writing could be accomplished by legerdemain I find it stupendously difficult to accept that hypothesis), nevertheless one notable fact must be set against Slade; namely, he entirely failed to obtain any writing within a carefully sealed box, albeit I left the box in his possession for some time. "Dr. Monck," another known medium, equally failed with the same box, and subsequently I caught the "Dr." in a gross bit of fraud, a piece of white muslin on a wire frame with a black thread attached, being used by the medium to simulate a "partially materialized spirit"!

as I have described, might, without intellectual confusion, be regarded as unaccountable freaks of that mysterious agency we call mind. Of whose mind is another question, or whether that mind belong to a living human brain or to an invisible being. The real point at issue is simply this, have we at the present day a sufficient accumulation of good evidence from trustworthy, independent observers, to outweigh the antecedent improbability of the alleged facts?

For my own part, and with much diffidence, I venture to think we have now enough evidence, and have had enough any time this last dozen years, to establish in an unbiassed mind a presumption in favour of the existence of certain physical phenomena inexplicable by the physical science of to-day. We have not anything like enough evidence to convince the scientific world, or even to remove all doubt from an impartial jury who demand scientific precision. It may be the very nature of the phenomena will prevent our ever obtaining the *kind* of evidence that physical science demands. Still more remote is the probability of our being able in this region to exercise that successful prevision which science justly regards as the test of accurate knowledge, and of laws built thereon. Possibly the pursuit of experimental psychology, which our Society is stimulating throughout both Europe and America, will in time throw much light upon the causes of phenomena such as I have ventured to bring before the Society this evening.

But along with more evidence of the right kind I am convinced we need a somewhat freer use of hypotheses. The popular theories and easy-chair explanations of Spiritualistic phenomena are manifestly inadequate. As a stimulus to investigation let us be bold in discussing novel hypotheses whilst we are rigidly careful in experiment. "Never," remarks De Morgan, "has any way been made by observations alone. Facts have sometimes started a theory; but until sagacity had conjectured, divined, guessed, surmised what these facts pointed to, the facts were a *mob*, not an army." I am therefore of opinion that the most hopeful advance in this subject will be made by daring hypotheses based upon a study of the evidence afforded by private mediumship. Of course, many erroneous explanations will be made at first; our theories are almost sure to be wrong. Intellectual progress, like walking, is a perpetual falling and recovery.

With much respect for the opinion of those who have arrived at an opposite conclusion, and quite admitting that future evidence may show that I am wrong and they are right, so far nothing that I have myself seen has given me sufficient reason to believe that an extramundane intelligence operates in Spiritualistic phenomena. So far as the evidence is trustworthy, I, for one, believe it points to the conclusion that, under conditions which are so restricted that we

are not put to intellectual confusion by frequent interruptions of the ordinary course of material laws, *mind, occasionally and unconsciously, can exert a direct influence upon lifeless matter.* Upon the living organised matter of the brain mind can and does act, i.e., if we admit mind apart from matter. Obviously pure materialism must reject all Spiritualistic evidence, and hence the great theoretic interest which attaches itself to this branch of psychical research. The hypothesis I have suggested will be considered less presumptuous by those who have followed the weighty evidence we have obtained in favour of the direct action of mind upon mind in thought-transference.

It is however a recognised and wholesome axiom of science that before unknown causes are assumed to exist all known causes should have been exhausted, and not until they are shown to afford an inadequate explanation are we at liberty to take a new departure. This axiom we have carefully borne in mind in our experiments in thought-transference; let us be equally cautious and equally free from timidity here. Mrs. Sidgwick, in the paper that is to follow this, will, I believe, conclusively show how hopelessly inattentive our observation usually is; with the firmest resolution we mentally relax our attention from time to time. Students of optics know that whilst we think we clearly see the whole figure of a man or a group of things, with one simultaneous act of vision, the opposite is the case; we can only see clearly one point at a time, and unconsciously our eyes sweep from point to point over the objects before us. Thus the muscles of the eyes require intervals of rest, which intervals come and go unbidden and unknown, and at these moments we are oblivious of all but a speck in the scene before us. Furthermore, to gain the needful rest or relief from monotony, our eyes outwit our will, and surreptitiously wander at the slightest distraction.

Mrs. Sidgwick's acute observations will probably explain by known causes much that now passes as good evidence in favour of Spiritualism, just as unconscious muscular action and extreme tactile sensibility explain much that passes as thought-reading. It seems to me however almost as irrational to explain away the whole phenomena of Spiritualism by fraud and mal-observation as is the attempt of some of our hasty critics to attribute to collusion and "muscle-reading" the experiments upon which we base our belief in thought-transference. Such critics forget that every honest investigator is sure to strain known causes to their utmost limit before he is driven to adopt an explanation that runs counter to the generalised experience of mankind. No doubt astuteness beyond the ordinary lot of mankind is the inalienable birthright of all critics, but they might spare us a little common-sense.

But hypotheses of the *conditions* of success in experimenting are even more useful at present than hypotheses of the cause of the

phenomena. I do not know that we have any right hastily to reject the working hypothesis of Spiritualists who say that sympathy, or at any rate the absence of mental antagonism, is a condition of success. I may be wrong, but I think sympathy is compatible with a calm judgment and clear and accurate observation ; and it may be that in the psychological world it is as necessary as certain material conditions in the physical world. Imagine for a moment the problem reversed, that we were living in a spiritual world where the properties of ordinary matter were unknown, where thought was supreme, thought-transference the mode of communication, and where our affections without bodily effort determined our actions and our position in space. Imagine now a stranger from the material world coming to tell us, say, of the discovery of the electric telegraph. He explains all the phenomena, brings the instrumental appliances, and shows that by this means he can talk to a friend who is invisible. He now leaves us to repeat the experiment for ourselves. We bend our minds to this new and, as it appears to us, rather useless and ridiculous experiment ; for it appears absurd that the thought of an absent person should require to come to us through the ticking of a needle, or the jumping up and down of a bit of iron, when we, by mere volition, can at once sympathetically communicate with any person, however distant. Overcoming our contempt we try, arrange the apparatus, and, as is our habit in the spiritual world, summon up our volition, but no answer comes ; we exercise our utmost belief in and sympathy for our unknown friend at the other end of the line, but the experiment is a failure—no response arrives. Whereon the stranger from the material world comes to our aid and says, “ Your states of mind have nothing to do with any material phenomenon, you have omitted an important experimental condition, for you have forgotten to close the circuit.” But when we discuss this question with our neighbours we all come to the conclusion that the electric telegraph is silly and useless even if true ; and it can’t be true because, we argue, mental forces operate at enormous distances and therefore the interval of a hundredth of an inch or less that was required to close the circuit can make no appreciable difference in the transmission of thought. So we disbelieve in the electric telegraph, and look upon the stranger as a knave or a fool, probably both.

I think this is not an unfair nor uninstructive analogy. It is because all working theories on these debateable Spiritualistic phenomena are so unrelated to our existing knowledge of the *physical* world, that the psychological problems before us receive such scant recognition at the hands of scientific men. But let us take courage ; the author of the *Vestiges of Creation*, referring to the ridicule with which his views were received, remarked :—“ A novelty, however true, if there be no received truths with which it can be shown in har-

monious relation, has little chance of a favourable hearing." And yet within a single generation from the time these words were written, thanks to the labours of Mr. Darwin and Mr. Wallace, the theory of Evolution has become a recognised part of biological science. In science, as in politics, the happier tendency of modern thought is "neither to mock, to bewail, nor to denounce men's actions, but to try to understand them."

In conclusion, I have, therefore, good hope that whilst Spiritualistic phenomena will be of little use to physical science, and I fear can never be demonstrated by purely physical methods of investigation, they may yet, in time to come, be accepted as an integral part of the dual world of matter and mind in the midst of which we live. And if so, the gain to human thought will be immense ; the present despairing, materialistic attitude of mind will give place to a more hopeful and withal a more humble attitude towards the infinite possibilities that are within our reach. And, if a personal allusion may be forgiven, I find, as I regard these phenomena, more and more help in understanding the laws of a spiritual kingdom, the mysteries of which Spiritualism cannot unfold, but the mental conditions of our approach to which it seems to shadow forth.

NOTE ON THE ABOVE PAPER.

By PROFESSOR BALFOUR STEWART, F.R.S.

I have read with much interest the paper by Professor Barrett, on some Physical Phenomena commonly called Spiritualistic witnessed by him. He expresses his conclusions in the following words : "Assuming the evidence to be trustworthy, I, for one, believe it points to the conclusion that, under conditions which are so restricted that we are not put to intellectual confusion by frequent interruptions of the ordinary course of material laws, *mind occasionally and unconsciously can exert a direct influence upon lifeless matter.*"

As this is a subject to which I have given a good deal of thought, I trust the Psychical Society will allow me to make one or two remarks upon it, and I am very sure my friend, Professor Barrett, will not object to this course.

Viewing the "Conservation of Energy" as the representative of physical laws, I nevertheless do not regard it in its birth, at least, as anything else than a scientific assertion—a very sagacious one, no doubt, but yet an assertion. We are in profound ignorance not only of the

intimate constitution of matter, but of the nature of those forces which animate the atom and the molecule. Under these circumstances, chiefly to advance physical knowledge by means of a working hypothesis, but partly, it may be, as a weapon against visionaries, we have formulated an assertion known as the "Conservation of Energy." It is unquestionable that this *so-called law* has greatly extended our knowledge of physics; nor have we met with any strictly physical experiment capable of repetition under fixed conditions that is inconsistent with this law. Now, what should be our course of action when a visionary comes before us with some variety of "Perpetual Motion"? The moral certainty that we are invaded by presumptuous ignorance is, no doubt, a sufficiently good excuse for not discussing the project. But we have a less objectionable method of dealing with such a man by asking him to put his project in execution, and to produce his machine, which we will then carefully examine. The fact that no such machine has been produced, and, as I said before, that no physical experiment contradicts the great laws of Energy, goes surely very far to justify us in regarding these laws as true—as laws which hold in what I may call the physical market of the world, ruling the physical transactions between man and man.

But there are many who are not content with such a limited application of physical laws. *In the first place*, they repudiate the doctrine of free-will because they regard it as being inconsistent with such laws; *secondly*, they repudiate the possibility of what are called miracles; and, *lastly*, they repudiate (with contempt) the evidence for telepathy and more especially that for Spiritualistic phenomena which has come before the Society for Psychical Research.

One consequence of this mental posture is that interminable discussions have arisen between a certain class of men of science and the supporters of Christianity, the latter of whom have been far from judicious in their method of defence. These have until recently considered miracles as Divine interferences with ordinary laws, and hence as abnormal and intellectually incomprehensible occurrences, while the Protestant theologians have imagined that the power to work miracles ceased with the Apostles. This latter doctrine was probably assumed as a polemical weapon at the time of the great controversy with the Church of Rome. It goes without saying that this method of looking at things will not recommend itself to men of science, and thus an embittered and useless discussion has continued between two classes of men, neither of whom has seemed to be either able or willing to enter into the position assumed by the other.

Of late years, however, miracles have come to be regarded not as breaks of law, but as phenomena embracing a higher law—a doctrine which is a great advance upon its predecessor. Now the

question naturally arises, if there be this higher law may there not be occasional traces of it to be met with in the world, even at this present age? It is, I think, exceedingly unfortunate that a large class of theologians have attempted to decide this question in the negative. It is not a question for them to decide, but for those who investigate matters of fact. This is in reality the question upon which the Psychical Society are engaged, and the circumstances which I have mentioned appear to me to lend an unusual importance to their investigations. Let us begin by allowing that the laws of Energy dominate the scientific market-place, and the scientific dealings between man and man. We are, I conceive, amply justified in extending this scientific assertion so far. But are we justified in extending it further? Are we, for instance, justified in asserting that under the very different conditions of things contemplated by the Psychical Society there may not be at least an apparent and *prima facie* breakdown of these laws; and more especially, are we justified in absolutely shutting our eyes to all evidence that may be brought before us in favour of such apparent interruptions? I cannot think so. We must examine everything. Because a scientific statement applies to one set of conditions, must it necessarily apply to everything else? I have always thought that this had to be ascertained by investigation, and not by dogmatic assertion, and I therefore conceive that our Society is abundantly justified in applying the Baconian method of research to all occurrences.