

EXTRAORDINARY FACTS

RESPECTING

TABLE-MOVING

AND

SPIRIT-RAPPINGS.

"Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape,
That I will speak to thee."

HAMLET.

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TABLE-MOVING AND SPIRIT-RAPPINGS.

I am not a credulous man—far from it; and though, from a habit I have of analysing, and slowly examining any new theory before I adopt it, my friends are accustomed to call me a scientific sceptic, they are mistaken. I consider that blind disbelief is the greatest mark of ignorance, but a nature acutely sensitive of the ridiculous leads me to shroud my immature opinions with a veil of raillery and *badinage*; lest, too hastily announced, I find myself in the position of the man who mistakes his lottery ticket, by a single cipher, for the winning number, and is roused from his pleasant delusion by the laughter of his friends. Neither am I an excitable man; of the bilious temperament, my mind calmly grapples, and, by dogged strength and perseverance, masters a subject, but is never carried away by those quick and impulsive bursts to which the nervous and enthusiastic sanguine are exposed. The extraordinary circumstances, therefore, which I am about to relate, are not likely to have gained force and colouring from any predisposition of mine, and the effect they have had upon my little-susceptible imagination is such, that I cannot consider myself justified in withholding them from the public, that they may assist towards forming a judgment on the mysterious Spirit-Rappings, which are now so generally exciting the attention of the world. Concealing, for obvious reasons, the real names of the persons concerned, I shall simply narrate facts of which I was a witness, and leave others to draw their own deductions from the melancholy history.

Little more than a month ago I spent the evening with a friend, at whose house it was suggested we should make experiments in Table-Moving, the accounts of a friend lately returned from America having greatly excited the curiosity of some of the party. Seven persons, therefore, sat round a circular table for the purpose,—my host, his wife, and two daughters, my friends Cator and Penrhyn,

and myself. Cator was the only one of the number who had previously made the experiment, he therefore undertook the direction of our movements, and certainly if implicit credence in the system could assist, he was well fitted for the task.

The table was covered with cloth to within three inches of the edge, leaving a ring of wood thus round the circumference. It rolled on castors, and was placed on oil-cloth. Before commencing, we made efforts to move the table by muscular action of the fingers, in order to satisfy ourselves what force was necessary to produce motion, and thus determine the nature of any which might afterwards take place. We found that considerable pressure and exertion were necessary to roll the table along.

A chain was now formed by hands overlapping each other by the little fingers, and, after sitting twenty-seven minutes, unequivocal oscillation commenced, and the table turned rapidly, keeping the party at a smart run to retain their positions. Volition had much weight, for on exerting it strongly, the revolution ceased, and then proceeded in a contrary direction. After this had continued some time, we broke the chain, and various other experiments were attempted.

The most universally successful amongst us was Penrhyn. His sharply-cut features, thin silky hair, and blue eyes, restless to a degree, denoted the highly nervous temperament; and whatever the power which influenced the objects on which we experimented, he at least eminently possessed it. His own unaided efforts produced startling effects; and a fair-sized work-table followed his steps round the room, with no more contact than the points of his fingers, a pressure apparently utterly inadequate to produce such an effect. On placing his hands under it, forming a pile by laying one hand upon the other, the same table rose, in four minutes, as high as his arms could accompany it. I doubted the reality of this feat, and proposed that my hand should be interposed between his and the wood. In this position the table was affected in three minutes, and, rising with us, I could feel no pressure from Penrhyn's hands, beyond that which must accompany contact. I was curious to see whether a metallic substance would receive any impression from his touch. I therefore proposed that he should put the point

of his finger on a bell, which we suspended by a thread from the bottom of the chandelier. He did so, and in five minutes vibration took place, and the bell rang violently, and continuously, till the finger was removed. The sound was, of course, muffled by contact, as it would have been under ordinary circumstances.

During all these experiments, Penrhyn himself was as much astonished as any of us; and I, at the same time that I was inwardly struck by the phenomena, vented my perplexity in satirical remarks, upon the absurdity of a number of people so patiently seated round an empty table, and I feared that the Barmecide's feast we were to have, would be as unsatisfactory as that which disappointed the hungry Hassan of old. This tone I continued even when the effects were most startling; then, indeed, with a more extravagant humour, to conceal the real astonishment I felt, and prevent the ridicule which apparent credulity would entail, should the facts prove to be merely tricks of legerdemain, or self-delusion. Cator, who had taken the new science fiercely under his protection, soon became irritated under the volley of raillery with which I accompanied all our proceedings, and often checked me with sharpness and ill-temper. Penrhyn, after the first surprise abated, had sunk into the state of deep melancholy and gloom in which he had been for some months past.

It may, perhaps, be as well here to state a fact which, though I myself only discovered it at a later period, is essential to understanding the events which follow. I have said that Penrhyn was of a highly nervous and excitable temperament, and for about two years previous to the time of which I now speak, this had increased to a degree equally distressing to himself and his friends. A trifle would irritate, and throw him into a state of agitation quite out of proportion to the cause. Slight actions were construed into affronts, and he seemed occasionally to consider all his friends as leagued together for the purpose of insulting him. Poor Penrhyn! let me not lean hardly on your errors *now*! His wife had died some years before, and his only surviving family was a son, then about three-and-twenty. This young man inherited many of the peculiarities of the father with his appearance, and, amongst others, his extreme excitability, which often led him into

fits of passion, that left him weak and depressed on their subsidence. About six months ago, some dispute, trifling I believe, had arisen between the father and son, which, however, treated with their peculiar idiosyncrasy, rose to such a pitch of acrimony and excitement, that a violent quarrel took place, and Penrhyn turned the boy out of his house. He never entered it again. When his rage subsided, Penrhyn made inquiries about his son, but could only discover that he had taken a passage to New York, in a vessel on the point of sailing at the time, but beyond this nothing had been heard of him. Penrhyn had left home to dissipate his self-reproaches by change of scene, and during his visit to the city in which I then resided, the circumstances I relate occurred.

To return from this long, though necessary digression : Cator, stung by my satirical treatment of his favourite science, exclaimed, " Oh ! H——, you are one of those near-sighted philosophers, who will never be ' ware of their own wit, till they break their shins against it.' "

" No ! my dear fellow," said I ; " I am so ware of it, that I don't wish to break my shins against it, as many of my acquaintances are in danger of doing. This Table-Moving and Spirit-Rapping are much too *striking* things for me to receive without caution."

" You will lag behind your age, H——, I seriously tell you, in your blind disbelief of these well ascertained facts. I can prove——"

" Pray don't, Cator ; don't try to convince me that when I go from this world, as I suppose to a life of rest and happiness, I shall have no better employment than rapping on tables, for the edification of every bread-and-butter miss who wishes to know the name of her future husband. Table-Rapping is too little to my taste in this world, to become heaven in the next."

I was amused at the solemn expression of Cator's face, as, without replying directly to my remark, he said, " Will you go with me at once to a friend's house, and if you be not convinced of the truth of Spirit-Rapping, I acknowledge myself a weak fool."

I laughingly agreed, and Cator asking Penrhyn and our host to accompany us, we instantly sallied forth. Our destination was not remote, and we were soon seated in the drawing-room of a gentleman, whom Cator introduced as Doctor S——,

Did a presentiment of the evil which was to happen oppress me even then? For my boisterous merriment was gone, and though I still preserved, outwardly, my former sarcastic bearing, yet I confess I felt little merriment at heart.

The room was large, and the dark crimson paper and heavy draperies of the windows combined to subdue still further the light inadequately given by a small shaded lamp, standing on the centre of the table. On entering, my eye was arrested by a painting on the wall, of Judith and Holofernes. The horror of the subject was heightened by the lurid glow from a flaring torch, which the painter had thrown over the picture, and which, shining on the dagger which Judith held in her hand, made that the most prominent object in the composition. I mention this point merely as affording some clue to the state of mind, which led me so unconsciously to select it from the surrounding objects, in my first rapid glance, and also to show the influence which the sombre apartment was, either by chance or designedly, calculated to exercise.

Cator explained the object of our visit, and Doctor S—politely consented to give us a specimen of these spiritual phenomena, with regard to which we, or at least I, was so utterly incredulous. He explained to us, before commencing, that the spiritual communications were made variously—by tiltings of the table, tapping sounds, and by mental inspiration of a Medium, who, under the influence of the conversing spirit, wrote on a slate that which was revealed. This, he said, was done utterly unconsciously by the Medium, and what was most extraordinary, the character of the writing was entirely different from that natural to the writer, and varied according as the spiritual interpreter was changed, which happened many times during an interview. When the answer was made by tilts or rappings, one tap signified an affirmative, two a negative, three were understood to be a demand for the alphabet, and words were made by taps correspondent to the order of the letters which composed them.

The party consisted of Doctor S— and his wife and daughter; the latter, a pale delicate girl of nineteen, being the Medium; Cator, our late host Philips, and myself. Penrhyn in one of his perverse moods refused to assist, and stood apart by the fire-place, looking on. We seated

ourselves round a circular rosewood table, with our hands placed upon it. This table was of the usual form, supported in the centre by a pillar, ending in a tripod, on which it rested. In each of the claws was a castor, but the table was not easily moved. Doctor S—— and his family now closed their eyes, and, from the motion of their lips, I gathered that they were either engaged in prayer, or as I would at another moment have been more inclined to believe, in uttering some necromantic incantation—“raising spirits from the vasty deep.” The solemnity and earnestness of their demeanour, however, checked the thought, and nipped in the bud a rising inclination to smile. Cator, I saw, was rather pale, and certainly took a serious view of the matter.

In rather less than ten minutes the table began to tilt violently, falling on the floor as if it had been raised and suddenly dropped again. This ceased, and Doctor S——, in a low and respectful tone, demanded whether the spirits would deign to hold converse with any of our party, and which—he successively named each of us, pausing for a reply. No answer was received until I was mentioned, when the Medium mechanically took the slate and wrote, “Man speaketh in secret, and saith, ‘who heareth?’ but the winds have ears, and proclaim it afar.” This was construed into consent to speak with me, and I was directed to inquire the name of the spirit. The answer returned through the Medium was, “William Pitt.” Up to this time there had been nothing peculiarly interesting to me in the exhibition, but when thus singled out to hold converse with the ghost of William Pitt, I felt a kind of ludicrous horror; in fact that kind of mood, which makes a man turn the most solemn circumstance into grotesque, though unearthly, glee.

I was desired to put any questions I pleased, but taken by surprise, I could think of nothing but an inquiry, “Will Russia make war upon Turkey?” probably suggested by associations with the statesman’s name. The Medium wrote, “Yes! the past has its debt, and the future its recompense; the gates shall open wide that the people may come in.” “What people?” I asked. “The Jews; yea, even now they stand upon the mountain-tops, and see the sun arise.” “Will England join in the fray?” “No! yet the mighty shall fall, and the isles shall rejoice.”

“Will any other nations make war?” “France and Austria will struggle together.” “Which will conquer?” “The Eagle of Austria shall lie in the dust, and the crows shall eat up the carcass.” “What shall be the end of these troubles?” “The nations shall be purified by fire, till the dross is burnt up; the reeds shall bend, but the trees be broken; the slave shall be raised, but the despot be humbled.” Here there commenced a low scratching noise on the table, which gradually became a distinct tapping. I put some other question, I forget what, but no answer was returned, though the rapping continued to increase with many symptoms of impatience. Philips now made an inquiry, and a spirit by taps in the way before explained, spelt out its name “Henry Pollowfen,” and accurately gave the day, month, and year of his birth, much to my friend’s astonishment, as he informed us that a cousin of this name had been his schoolfellow, but that he had lost sight of him for some years. In answer to his inquiries, the rapping declared that he had departed this life on his way from Barbadoes, on board ship, on the 5th of June, 1851. This was afterwards ascertained to be correct.

By this time we had all become somewhat excited by the singular nature of the communications received, and several startling coincidences which I cannot even now explain. Spirits purporting to be Cobbett, Herschell, and persons individually known to us, answered in succession; and I myself was startled by one who gave the name of my former nurse, the date of her death, and mentioned facts which I do not believe any one present could have known. At this period the rapping became louder, and was not confined to the table alone, but appeared to come from the floor and walls, and from a book-case at one end of the apartment; and one of the rings on Mrs. S——’s fingers suddenly burst open.

Penrhyn, who had become gradually more and more excited, here joined our circle with an abruptness and evident design, which would certainly have struck me at the time, as it did on recalling the circumstance of that unhappy evening, had I not myself been so much disturbed, and occupied with the mysterious sounds about me.

The mode of communication was again changed, and Miss S—— by a sudden and apparently somnambulistic impulse

took the slate, and without fixing her eyes on it at all, wrote, "Let the soul of man look on the pages of the past, and blot out its evil with his tears." Dr. S—— had taken the slate towards himself to read this sentence, and in doing so had brought it within view of Penrhyn. We were roused from our attention to the Doctor, by an exclamation from Mrs. S——, and became sensible of the extraordinary appearance of Penrhyn. He leant forward towards the table, with his eyes protruding and fixed on the slate, with a look of horror and alarm absolutely appalling. The mouth was partially open, and in a low voice, hoarse with agitation, he murmured "My God, that writing!" I looked at the slate, and saw a writing certainly peculiar, but without anything to discover the cause of Penrhyn's agitation. We spoke to him repeatedly, but could not rouse him from his horrible abstraction. Mrs. S—— began to be alarmed, and we would have discontinued the experiment at once, had not Dr. S—— suggested the advisability of proceeding, in hopes of diverting his attention by leading him on by the same process, beyond any chance coincidence which thus excited him. This treatment was not without plausibility; we therefore agreed to proceed. How little conscious were we then of the cause of Penrhyn's terror-stricken aspect! How dreadful the mistake we committed! It was thought advisable to ask the name of the communicating spirit, as the best means of solving any false conjecture Penrhyn might have made. The question was put, and the girl at once commenced writing in the same abstracted manner. Dr. S—— took the slate and read "John Henry ——." Here he abruptly stopped short, with his lips gathered up for the next letter, which our alarmed attention easily interpreted as "P." The cold drops were standing on Penrhyn's forehead, and he still maintained the same fixed and horrified glare, as he muttered, "Yes! John Henry Penrhyn." He seemed like a man who saw some terrible object before him, and though the description of hair "standing on end" is so common, never had I seen anything so near the reality as then. We were now thoroughly roused, and all started to our feet except Penrhyn, and Miss S—— the Medium, who sat in a kind of trance. Penrhyn was rivetted to the same position, a perfect personification of terror, and at inter-

vals, the word "Dead! dead!" escaped him, without a perceptible motion of the lips. The slate had, in the confusion, been pushed towards the Medium, who, as if considering Penrhyn's exclamation a question, had commenced writing in reply. As soon as I became aware of this, I drew away the slate, but could not repress the exclamation which burst from my horrified lips on reading, "Yes! died of——." Here Dr. S—— snatched away the slate to prevent the completion of the sentence; but, unfortunately, in doing so, Penrhyn's eyes, which followed every motion of the fatal writing, endowed, as it were, with supernatural power, caught the word, and finished the sentence with a hollow groan—"Starvation!" and fell to the ground in a kind of epileptic fit, from which he emerged an incurable madman. My God! may I never again witness such a scene.

Two days after, I wrote to a friend in New York, giving an account of this melancholy affair. I have just received the following letter, in reply:—

MY DEAR H.,—Your letter inexpressibly surprised and shocked me. How careful we should be in playing with edged tools! Your account of the emigration of the son to this country, recalled to my mind a paragraph which I had seen in a country newspaper a couple of months ago. I referred, and after some trouble, discovered the one in question. I have cut it out, as I fear it throws more light on this terrible and mysterious affair.

In haste, yours very truly,
W. O——.

PARAGRAPH ENCLOSED.

INQUEST.—On Monday, an inquest was held before Mr. Challoner, Deputy-Coroner, at the Chequers Tavern, on the body of a young man, apparently about 23 or 24 years of age. It was deposed that he had been wandering about the neighbourhood for some days back; but suspecting from his appearance, which was superior to his condition, that he was an imposter, or driven by misconduct to beggary, assistance had, unfortunately, been refused him. He was found under a shed, in the timber-yard of our townsman, Mr. Huth, on Friday morning, quite dead. The body was much emaciated, and the left elbow-joint absolutely protruded from the skin. Nothing was found

upon him which could lead to identity, except the initials "J. H. P.," written on the tattered remains of his hat. All endeavours to discover his friends have hitherto failed. After half-an-hour's deliberation, a verdict, "Died of starvation," was returned, coupled with a censure on the town officers who had rejected the case.

Poor Penrhyn is now confined in an asylum for the insane, and no hopes whatever are held out of his restoration to reason.

I feel it my duty to make these facts known to the public, that this mysterious system may receive close examination, and also as a warning to ignorant curiosity.

What is this mystery? Is it fraud, or is it a spiritual manifestation reserved for these latter days? I leave the public to decide, offering no comments of my own upon the facts I relate.