

A GLEAM OF

THE

SPIRIT-MYSTERY.

BY

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“What is't? A Spirit?”

LONDON:

BICKERS AND BUSH, LEICESTER SQUARE.

1861.

*This Letter from Evelyn to Astrophel may form a post-
script to "The Philosophy of Mystery."*

THE
MYSTERY OF THE SPIRITS.

“Approach, my Ariel, come.”—*Tempest*.

THE Spirit-world is a subject of the deepest and most sacred interest, and it is with the hope to reconcile, rather than dispute, that I presume to institute its study.

The belief that the spirits of those we loved on earth are hovering and smiling around our pillow, is one of the holiest consolations of the Christian. The reflex pilgrimage of the soul is like a rainbow in the heavens, an imprint on the conscience of the truth and blessing of immortality. And who, my Astrophel, may tell how bright and glorious the influence of “the divinity that stirs within us” on the heart? who, conscious of the presence of a good spirit, would even cherish a guilty thought, or rush madly on in the career of sin, converting the smile of an approving angel into the dark and dismal frown of an accusing spirit? There is even a spice of dignity in many a *profane* phantom-legend: the demon of Socrates, and the spirit of Tasso, may, for aught we know, have been ethereal entities.

But we are now to study the spirits of our own day; and I might set myself, *in limine*, to unfrock the charlatan, for his tricks are far eclipsed by the honest legerdemain of Wiljalba Frikell and the wizards of the hour; but I am not ambitious of breaking a lance with a trickster, or, like La Mancha's monomaniac, to fight with windmills. No, I will commune with yourself, my Astrophel, and with a sense of humility, sincere as your own faith, I will challenge the *rationale* of those proselytes who, haunting the mazes of a mysterious labyrinth, and blinking the light of physiology, blazon forth a world of wonders, and rest content with a preternatural hypothesis, that has tempted the smile of the cynic, and the rude and senseless ridicule of the scorner.

Truth may be the object of all; but beware, it is in imminent peril of a swamp in this struggle of proselytes and sceptics for victory. Believe me, I am conscious that your eyes may be lucid as mine own, but, in our scant of wisdom, it becomes neither you nor me to lift a haughty brow and blurt out, "I am Sir Oracle!"

"There are more things in heaven and earth
Than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

Content us, then, to look on both sides of the shield, and I will accept your affirmation as a fact, and you will please to listen to my exposition patiently. Thus only may we hope to unveil the mystery, and transfer the sublime subject from the cell of the charlatan to the arena of devout philosophy. Many, perchance, may deem my special psychology profanation. Why more than to broach the theory of the rainbow-prism or the lightning-flash? The study of heaven and earth is a direct inspiration of natural theology, and the exposition of those laws divine that lead "from nature up to nature's God."

Ere we discourse, however, 'tis meet we set the spirit mysteries in array before us, and it is indeed a study.

There are who affirm and adopt the reality of the spirit-world with a fond and almost puerile credulity. "Ask no cause," writes William Howitt, "we make a short cut to the facts, we take Spiritualism as an intelligence, we do not seek to ask for cause, the cause is palpable before us,—the laws of Spiritualism are as sure as the Universe." Thus, content with their short cut, they flout all reasoning, and sever the Gordian knot with this proud assumption, Our word is law.

There are who see and believe; yet, in default of *complete* demonstration of things they will not study and do not understand, call up their *exotic* element, and challenge philosophy at once to adopt their creed.

There are who shrink abashed and dispirited from the study, murmuring with old moral Gower, "This daie venim is shedde in holy churche or temporall which meddleth with the spirituall." There are others who with more intense terror of Pandemonium, and of the anathema in the Pentateuch, "The soul that turneth after such as have familiar spirits,—I will even set my face against that soul," mutter their dogmatic phrases thus: "I say it as a Christian priest, it is diabolism;—all the work of the spirits of wickedness in the high places;—the business that walketh about in the dark;—the invasion of the noenday devils;" and so on. And in truth, when we look on the senseless cajolery of many a popular seance, we confess the priest may be half justified in his protest against their diablerie, and might take the interpretation of Wickliffe as a text: "A beastli man perseyueth not the thinges that ben of the spyryt, for it is foli to him."

The zoology of the legion is a far more serious study. The definition of a spirit or a glorified body is not for

mortal pen to trace, it is a subject only for the celestial.

“This eternal blazon must not be
To ears of flesh and blood,”

although Swedenborg affirms that in Eden, before the fall, the soul was visible, and its classic names and our own synonymes, apparition, spectre, phantom, ghost, shadow, shade, imply that it *appears* but *is not*, an element rather than a being. Since however they come among us and display so wondrously their wisdom and their art, it is fair game to note the attributes or endowments of these slaves of the seance, if still, with courtesy, I may term them so, seeing that, like the slave of the lamp, they must wait for a sort of invocation ere they *divine*. No *spontaneous* impulse, no moonlight revel, like the fairies, while mortals sleep, not even an outbreak at the midnight hour, to indicate their independence of the flesh. Like Hecate, you have enlisted for your seance a very Protæan group; there be

“Black spirits and white,
Red spirits and grey.
Spirits of health and goblins damned.”

There be some that, like Ariel, do their spiriting gently, and some who scratch and tear with all the wanton malice of a Puck, and *strike* and rebel, especially on the intrusion of an unbeliever. If they yearn for proselytes, they should, methinks, play before the sceptic: we pray in the haunts of sin if we wish to save a soul.

Fascinated by the feats of these *exotic* spirits, you may forget, my Astrophel, that you possess an innate *spirit of your own mind*. Of this you are conscious and sure, as an element of your being; the exotic is but in supposition.

Of the endowments of this mighty spirit of the mind, for such I will term it, I might still be silent; yet, as

you have called up or brought down a spirit *from* a far country, I may fairly accredit and send forth a spirit *into* a far country, although I may not hope to

“Unfold

What worlds, and what bright regions hold

Th' immortal mind that hath forsook

Its mansion in this fleshy nook.”

You have written that Spirits are “cosmopolite amid th' eternity of worlds,” and perchance it is this transit of an intellectual element of mind through illimitable space, that may open to us that glorious world of intelligence that we term idea, in all its phases of dream, vision, ecstasy, reverie. It was in his ideality that Swedenborg had his gleam of Heaven, Milton of Eden, and Dante of Inferno, and Teresa and Cecilia revelled in their ecstasy. Many may smile, many may frown at this belief; but one of the firmest and most absolute proselytes of spiritualism, granting me this *projectility* of mind, confesses that he has “impressed his thought, and induced mesmeric sleep” two hundred miles off.

With this concession we will draw the curtain, and lo! without the wand of Prospero, or the lamp of Aladdin, the spirits are in presence; and L., who has addressed me boldly on this deep psychological theme, will accept this as my answer to his challenge.

The seance is opened, and, to the joy of the proselytes crowding around the table, missives of great moment from the Antipodes are scratched by the spirits in waiting. “Young men see visions” of absent friends; the maidens are trembling at the rustling of the spirit that is scratching prophecy beneath the table. This play is strange enough, although reason might deem it a mere emanation of the mind; but lo! in a moment, “instead of obtaining an echo of his own thoughts, he is startled with thoughts in direct opposition to his own,” and feeling and volition are equally thwarted.

It is my duty to take up the gauntlet that L. has flung down, and presume on my exposition. I will remind him that the brain, the home of the mind, is a double organ, and, like the eyes, the ears, the lungs, the pairs may think, and see, and hear, and breathe, *singly*; were one half or one of either organs lost, the other might suffice to carry on the function with integrity; but if one eye, one ear, one lung, one hemisphere be healthy, the other deranged, the senses and the sense are all discordant. Now, as there is double vision in the eyes, there is double thinking in the brain, even at the same moment; the spirit in one hemisphere may question, the other may reply, and the sentiments of the two may be in utter discordance. Thus the same being may at once assume two characters; thus Porson, the classic coryphæus, Wilson, the genius of art, Cook, the tragic star, who dazzled the world by the splendour of their genius, were at times drunk to the very depths of degradation; thus Bacon was "the wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind;" thus Byron may have written with one brain Don Juan, the Hebrew melodies with the other; and Shelley might be working charity while brooding in the shadow of Atheism. Even the other day, in America, the pure spirit of Swedenborg, the saint, was made to blaspheme, and confess that he had *two opposite feelings!*

I might weary you with traits of this intellectual discordance, so clearly elucidated by the working of two *cerebral* hemispheres in different conditions. This display of vice and virtue in one mind *you* will cite as the struggle of two spirits for the possession of man's heart: be it so. But I believe that in this antagonism of the hemispheres of brain may lie even the *secret of insanity*. Now all this may be the mere play of the spirit of the mind, may it not?

We will shift the seance across the Atlantic, and I

will present one of those mysterious scenes that have made proselytes even of the learned; and we do not wonder at it.

At the house of a lady in New York, there met a group of truth-seeking, intellectual guests, yourself perchance among them. At the beck of the spirits who scratched their preliminaries, the table-legs were enveloped, and the *room darkened*—for darkness and seclusion seem to be the life and element of modern spiritualism. Then sheets of paper were folded and moistened by the breath of the lady of the house, and then, with colours, pencils, and brushes, flung beneath the table. There was a sort of fidget among the spirits, and in a few minutes' time was scratched, and lo, the paper displayed coloured spirit-drawings of the most elaborate finish! perchance from the pencils of Claude or Salvator. Of this as a *fact* there can be no doubt, it was attested by men of worth and station; you were a witness, I have myself seen the drawings at the house of a truthful gentleman, another witness; and then who will impugn the honour of a lady, or express even a hint at collusion or the sleight of the jongleur! Yet science may be less courteous in her jealousy; she may marvel that a wonder-working invisible thing could not do its spiriting in open day; she may challenge the *possibility* of illusion or even collusion, and point to the exposition of the Cock-lane, and Stockwell, and Woodstock impostures. She may whisper of sympathetic colours brought out by heat or acid. She may point to wonders even more wonderful than spirit-painting, to the electric wire that vibrated a message across the Atlantic, even to that very New York, in a score of minutes; to a drawing penned at Leghorn coming out as quickly, line for line, on a paper in Florence; and to the camera, that will imprint a highly wrought sun-picture in a score of seconds. Think you now, if these wonders had

been displayed before those very scavans of New York, sitting in seance half a century ago, they might not have deemed the telegram, the pentelegraph, or the photograph, a spirit, even as the savage, when he beheld his visage in the polished shield? And yet the principles of those wonder-works were established at the Creation, and are as old perchance as the epoch of the Saurian giants—*now for the first time developed.*

I may not echo even a breath of suspicion here, for such a presence ensures my willing courtesy; but you must not marvel if occlusion and the fear of daylight do somewhat mar the truthfulness of the scene. Frown not, either, if, in expounding the wonders, I hint at the *possibility* of self-delusion by a *combination* of causes, the condition of brain predisposing. I may remind you, too, that the mind of genius may be often specially prone to illusion, from its very scope of ideality. That spirit of the mind, by the light of which, in its intensity or acmè, Milton drew in "empyrean air," and Shakespeare worked out a creation, is like a spark of divinity; but it is certain that the brighter this light of mind, the deeper will be its shadow; there is an intensity of darkness as of light, for Nature is fond of contrasts.

"Great wits to madness nearly are allied."

Let the brain be hyper-excited or exhausted, so that ideality overcrows the judgment, and even mighty genius will often run very wild in the field of phantasy. The phantom spirits of Socrates and Tasso were cherished and honoured as *lares* in the households of the sage and the poet. And what is the effect of the solemnity of the seance, the hope, the fear, the intense brooding on one theme, but to induce this excitement of brain, and bring on a state of glamourie, faint and transient, it is true, yet enough to call up a phantom, or bewilder the

sense, and delude a feeling, even by a thought or a wish?

A lady of high intellect assured me that, on her ardent wish to hold the dead child of her sister, it became a palpable weight on her lap; yet she knew and confessed it to be illusion. But as sight is the golden sense of all, phantasy is the pet illusion, and thus opens on us, in all its splendour, the special gift of clairvoyance, deuteroscopia, second sight. This wondrous exaltation is the glory of the seance, and its spiritualism of course implicitly believed, and blazoned by the medium as the visitation or impartment of a spirit.

We cannot marvel at this belief in those who blink psychology; for this concentration of thought or memory of ideality, confers on the clairvoyant all the honours of the sibyl and the oracle; or that the people gaze with awe and admiration on a being of so bright or so dark an endowment. The brooding on one theme will often blaze like a meteor of the mind.

The pains of memory have oft a phase of a far deeper dye even than those of fear. Take the agony of remorse, and the brooding on its black theme, and then behold the *uncalled* and agonizing glamour of Brutus and Macbeth.

We cannot marvel either that the gifted seer will indulge and blazon forth his glamourie, and glory in the possession of the spirit that haunts his brain, and invests him with the solemn mantle of the prophet. Few like Allan Macaulay will confess the secret of their malady, and "thank God that the *mist* hath departed from their spirit." You may remember this Allan Macaulay and Saul, who was a gifted seer "among the prophets," were cured of their deep melancholy and their illusion by the harps of Annot Lyle, and David the son of Jesse.

This pet illusion of clairvoyance has proved a court card in the hands of the charlatan from the days of

Cagliastro. To intensify the spells of the spirits they brought into play the magic mirror and other talismans : thus the wizard entranced the eyes of Henry Howard with the bright shadow of the fair Geraldine. Reichenbach, however, affirms that only one in a thousand is endowed with this special gift of seeing forms and faces in mirrors and glass globes and water.

The pet talisman of the modern mystics is a table, and we may fancy we see William Howitt and a solemn doctor with the pet table between them. The leech is brooding in deep anxiety on the peril of a sick child. He pops a mental question through the table, a mode of divination as old as the era of Tertullian, and it tells him the child is dead. The *fear* had been the "father of his thought" all the way from home ; and yet Mr. Howitt believes this to be a spirit-working in his little table. Had Owain Glyndwr in this mood called "spirits from the vasty deep," they would, be sure, have "come when he did call for them."

And this gift of clairvoyance you consecrate as the impartment of an unearthly spirit, and you blazon to the world one success among a myriad of failures, and challenge our implicit faith, blinking the fallacy of the promise, or backing out with this unblushing apology, the spirit-derangement on the intrusion of an unbeliever !

But how will the light of physiology bear on this most subtle subject ? Listen ; for you have not studied with me the secret of the nerve and its potent endowment of the muscle : but if you will believe that the nerve-force, before diffused throughout the system, may be *intensely concentrated* in one sense or organ, you will learn the secret. You will discover qualities in these organs that were *latent* or *in abeyance*, until by some special excitement they have become so highly exalted as to burst forth in the semblance of a *new faculty*. With the

credulous this is, of course, the working of a spirit, and it is indeed astounding, even to those who can explain it.

The exaltation may be spontaneous, the effect of natural causes. There was a girl near Bedford Row, who, during a state of *hysterical ecstasy*, breathed *for the first time*, as it was thought, melodies in such seraphic and unearthly tones as to astonish her learned visitors, and completely bewilder her mother, who fairly believed there was a spirit singing in her child. Now this concentration may be the secret of many a seance of our own day, and we will yet linger on the theme. In another salon in our great city, there was a display more wondrous far than even the transatlantic scene; in which the love of painting and poesy were inspired in a moment into a brace of juveniles by accomplished spirits of the olden time. Around a table in —, sat a family brooding in deep thought, and in solemn waiting for spirit-calls: after the usual lapse of time, and trial of strength and patience, behold, there glided into presence the shade of Titian, and, hovering over a fair girl, she traced pencillings, although a mere novice in the art, in a style of surpassing beauty perfectly Titianesque.

Then came Quintus Horatius Flaccus, and the great Alfred himself, and under their inspiration a boy, yet in his grammar, scratched in a twinkling an Horatian ode, and a runic rhyme, in the idiom, I believe, of the Eddas, or the Sajas. Now whether there was in each thus under excitement a latent spark of genius fanned into a flame, or a memory of half-forgotten study developed or revived, we will not guess, but it may be a mere question of degree after all. The suddenness of this display was marvellous. True, but the light of geometry and the perfection of melody blazed forth from Pascal and Mozart even in their infancy.

The descent from the bright psychology of the spirit down to its gymnastics is somewhat of a degradation,

but it is still more startling. The innervation of a muscle is a wondrous proof of the great Creator's power, but that must be a marvellous endowment indeed, the investing of a *fleshless* thing with all the nerve-force of a giant.

You will yourself concede, my Astrophel, that we might have hoped for the communing of this fleshless thing by some silent internal mode of intelligence: from a divine thing there would be the inbreathing of a thought to awaken consciousness; the evoking of a shade, the raising of a phantom, the response to a question, might be in soft and whispered syllables, as a mere human creature with all its flesh and blood might do: even the working of a demoniac would, we might think, be a *soundless fiat*. If there be profanation, is it not in this stretch of absolute materialism, this degradation of an ethereal inorganic element?

Yet it is not for me to dictate; spirit, like flesh, has a right to work in any fashion, with any tools it pleases.

The kick, and the poke, and the scratch, we might perchance fathom, but the Titanic feat of your destructives are on the utmost limits of credibility.

And here I might recount "in Ercles vein," how huge mahogany tables have been lifted to the ceiling, or torn into shreds, and dashed through hall doors into the street; but these and other marvels, are they not written in the books of the Judge and the Doctor over the Atlantic? Truly these American Nights Entertainments will be a very treasure to those who believe or admire Munchausen and the Tales of the Genii. Yet although we have not implicit faith, we may for the nonce pore into the magic mirror of our own mind's eye, and there we shall behold one Governor Tallmadge, of Wisconsin, hoisted on a table in mid air, *against* his own especial will, and even that of the medium.

Then we will look nearer HOME, and there *you* are,

my Astrophel, floating like any other air-bladder, beneath the ceiling on enchanted sofa of the Eastern prince, and this too at the will of the spirits you have evoked, and not your own!

There is a strike, it seems, among the spirit mechanics, a revolt of the rebel sepoys of the seance, the *undeveloped* spirits as they are termed, and one little Puck thus confesses that it is the slave of some higher demoniac powers, in a very zigzag scrawl, scratched off in Judge Edmond's book, "I was sent here to annoy and worry you." With devout aspiration I do implore the spirits, if they be real and true, not to trifle thus with time and patience: if they must work on earth, be it to purify the heart of man, to "do the State some service," do any other good, and we may then confess that their "uncanonized bones hearsed in death," have not "burst their cerements," and "revisited the glimpses of the moon" in vain.

But I must set myself to my exposition, for it has been whispered that a combination of natural causes did effect this Titanic feat. I am yet conscious that it were a bold presumption that a group of scavans were the sport of glamourie, yet even the sage exponent of "Natural Magic" confessed, 'tis said, that he did not know, but the table *seemed* to move: and you remember the proof of something like illusion in the experiment of Faraday. The table was believed to move one way, while it really moved the other; and the automata declared that the table moved while it was at complete rest, their hands, fatigued by their perpendicular pressure, having moved involuntarily and unconsciously over its surface.

It has been whispered that in this state of illusion the Governor's friends had exhausted their O. D. force on the table, and thus were reduced and rendered powerless, like Frankenstein, to control the monster

they themselves had raised ; and that you, so positive in your faith, may have become, by long and weary watching, *negative*,—for in truth you are wan and wasted, my Astrophel ; and thus, as the loadstone lifts the iron bar, so by some magnetic force you were lifted to the ceiling. And where the power to effect these giant feats ? It may be in the *concentration of organic nerve-force*. Reflect on it as displayed in the electric fishes, the gymnotus and torpedo, from which, by the way, Faraday evolved caloric, and Schoenberg effected the combustion of gold, and Matteuei induced magnetism and charged steel needles, and Linari and Fahlberg drew electric shocks—the magnetic force of one fish being equal to fifteen Leyden jars. So closely allied is the force of these poor cold-blooded fish to electro-magnetism. So, also, in certain states of the nervous system varied degrees of unconscious force are generated, from the involuntary twitchings of *chorea*, to the intensity of acute convulsion. A fragile girl, as sensitive as the mimosa, may require during her *hysterical convulsion* five men to hold her ; when the fit is off, the nervous power exhausted, the accumulated electricity again diffused, she may be floored by a feather.

Remember the strange and inordinate feats in the epidemic rage of the middle ages—the Tanz-wuth of Aix-la-Chapelle and Strasbourg, the convulsionnaires of Paris, the *Tarantulism* of Apulia, the *Tigretier* of the Abyssinian Christians, and the leaping ague of Scotland. Look on these monomaniacs, writhing with wounds self-inflicted, leaping and dancing with demoniac force and wildness, a raging erethysm, they profanely called religion, blazing like wild-fire in the brain ; and you might well believe them to be *spirit-laden*.

Yet the secret of all this may be simply the concentration of organic force, and the instinctive *effort to relieve congestion of blood* by intense and often uncon-

scious action. So music cured the bite of the Tarantula spider by lighting up a dance of the furies.

I have written all this, my Astrophel, that you may reflect on these marvellous things and principles that Nature displays before your eyes, and, by the light of analogy, reconcile those mysteries that many believe do yet hoodwink and bewilder your mind.

Adieu, until we again "unsphere the spirit of Plato" on the velvet floor of Tintern.

I have presumed to invoke your spirits for the pure love of truth, not, I hope, uncourteously or profanely: but whether they may yet demonstrate their reality, or remain a myth or a mystery, or whether you or I or both are dreaming, we may never know on earth. The light divine will be hidden from us all, until that solemn hour, when the pure spirit shall burst from its cell of flesh, and wing its flight to a higher and a brighter sphere. Adieu.

EVELYN.