

THE PRESS

VERSUS

SPIRITUALISM



BY INVESTIGATOR.

THE PRESS *VERSUS* SPIRITUALISM

THE report of the London Dialectical Society's Committee on the "Phenomena alleged to be Spiritual Manifestations," has met with a reception remarkable as showing the variety and changes of attitude assumed by the press in relation to subjects of proscribed or unpopular character. On the one hand, straitened by mercenary considerations and actuated by motives of superficial expediency, the press, in some of its phases, is too venal for the duties devolving upon it. To be on the popular, or rather, the paying side is the main consideration; hence upon tabooed subjects are brought into play all the artifices of obscuratation, ridicule, inuendo, suppression, and mis-statement, but so cleverly woven into a general appearance of candour, that the community is misled rather than informed, or, at any rate, that large portion of the public mind sufficiently gullible to believe in immaculate editors and reviewers, or sufficiently enervated to substitute for its own thought-effort, mere passing commentaries, indifferent as to their trustworthiness or origin.

Spiritualism, so called, is a case in point. It is a subject in bad odour—a subject to be avoided—a subject on which feeling, especially religious feeling, runs high—a subject "uncanny"—a subject held meet for derision, but never deemed worthy of painstaking investigation. No surprise need, therefore, be occasioned by the fact that the late report has met with the usual treatment of the unpopular, and that conscientious reviewing has given place to misquotation and garbling, and the endeavour to misrepresent its character and incidence.

But, on the other hand, a more worthy section of the press has at heart the interests of truth; and regardless of merely popular impulses, seeks to present controverted subjects in a tentative, if not a judicial spirit. In this direction the criticism on the inquiry in question has been tempered, and seems to invite a rejoinder in like courteous manner. Having regard to the amount of attention now bestowed upon Spiritualism, such rejoinder cannot be out of place, and may help to modify the disappointment arising in many

cases from well-intentioned strictures, which, through their irrelevance to the actual issues raised, and through their oversight of the moral conveyed by the investigation reported, are inconclusive.

First, then, it may be urged that although the report incidentally covers the whole question of Spiritualism yet that practically, it is concerned with the phenomenal aspect of the subject only; for the Dialectical Society appointed its committee to report specifically on the phenomena alleged to be spiritual manifestations, and not upon Spiritualism as a creed or a philosophy. Thus it will be found that to whatever extent the investigators may have testified to the occurrence of certain phenomena, they have not ventured to determine their source.

Fairly, however, to review the investigation a comparison must be made. First should be noted the general and public condition of the subject, immediately prior to the enquiry; and next, to what extent that condition has been affected by the results attained.

At the outset were the spiritualists, considerable in numbers and pretensions, avowing the frequent occurrence of certain phenomena, asserting for them a highly beneficial character, and attributing such occurrences to the agency of departed human beings.

On the other hand was a vast public and the press, for the most part wholly indifferent to the subject; but where concerned, entertaining towards it opinions of marked scepticism and hostility. These opinions may be thus briefly enumerated:—

- 1.—That no such phenomena as alleged occurred at all.
- 2.—That the alleged phenomena were the result of imposture or delusion, or of both, in varying degrees.
- 3.—That the alleged phenomena had a basis of reality, but were intensified in effect by delusion or imposture.
- 4.—That such phenomena occurred, but were explainable by known natural causes.
- 5.—That such phenomena occurred, and were attributable to natural causes not yet ascertained.
- 6.—That in any case the phenomena were utterly frivolous, and unworthy of investigation.
- 7.—That the manifestations only occurred in the presence of believers in the same.
- 8.—That mediumship, so called, was in all cases professed and practised for the mere sake of money getting.
- 9.—That the partisans of Spiritualism were for the most part uncultured, illiterate, and credulous.
- 10.—That spiritualists, as a body, shrank from any examination of their claims, and placed every obstacle in the way of fair investigation.

This, roughly, was the popular view of the subject at the commencement of the enquiry; and the first fact to be noticed at its

close is, that whatever may be the *rationale* of the report it satisfies neither of the opposing parties. To the sceptic it goes too far, to the spiritualist it is much too tentative; thus do both sides indirectly bear testimony to a faithful discharge of the investigator's office.

The committee immediately upon its appointment urgently invited oral and written evidence from every quarter. The spiritualists alone responded, being represented by witnesses of well-ascertained respectability from every grade of society; while the upholders of the imposture and delusion theories were conspicuous only by their absence, at any rate from the ordeal of the witness-box and of cross-examination.

Had the enquiry gone no further, the evidence thus collected would have been answer sufficient to much of hostile criticism. To characterise such evidence as "hearsay" is to misrepresent it, for it is as direct as that received in our law courts, each and every witness having been requested to speak only to facts within his or her personal knowledge, a restriction with which most complied. The value of this evidence is enhanced by the declaration from many of the witnesses that their original attitude towards Spiritualism was one of scepticism; while some again had made acquaintance with the manifestations years ago, and had not ceased to continue observers, or wavered in their belief as to the existence and origin of the phenomena.

That the "greater marvels" belong to the oral evidence and to the correspondence is probably true; but is this the precise question to raise? To what extent is there agreement or disagreement amongst the witnesses themselves? Has the committee been enabled practically to prove or disprove any of the facts alleged in the evidence? These are questions, perhaps, more pertinent; and is it of no significance that men and women of acknowledged trustworthiness, professional status, culture, and refinement should be found willing to give their personal testimony upon matters exposing themselves to almost certain contempt and ridicule; the while not a single champion volunteered to testify to the more popular beliefs in trick and hallucination.

But the investigators (thirty-six in number) determined to experimentalise, and for this purpose divided themselves into six sub-committees. In this circumstance may the true value of the report be found, or rather in the corroboration thus obtained of much in the oral and written evidence. This corroboration, so far as it took place, may indeed be considered by the spiritualistic party as but "ordinary" or elemental, and as "outdone" at many a private seance. But by the public or by sceptics no such considerations can be advanced. For them the enquiry must be, Has there been corroboration at all? and next, What is the nature, extent, and authority of such corroboration? For were not the spiritualists challenged on the very grounds that the phenomena alleged never occurred, or were but the produce of fraud or impos-

ture? And did not the spiritualists, taking up the gauntlet, reply that whatever might be made of the origin of the phenomena, their occurrence could be established by experiment without aid from them or from any of their mediums (so called)?

Proceeding then to private experiment "without the aid or presence of any professional medium," the more diligent and persevering of the sub-committees were enabled to report the occurrence of certain of the disputed phenomena which need not here be explained, but which are popularly known as "table moving" and "rappings," the said manifestations being commonly accompanied in greater or less degree by marked indications of intelligence. A large majority of the investigators thus became actual witnesses to the phenomena under conditions far removed from the possibility of fraud or delusion, and their testimony is the more valuable seeing that the report records that "the greater part of them commenced their investigation in an avowedly sceptical spirit." Such evidence indeed can hardly be over-rated, especially in view of the status and trustworthiness of the investigators and of their carefulness not to over-state their conclusions, but rather to leave moot points for further research.

We have presented the case as it stood at the commencement of the enquiry;—let us now state how it stands at the close:—

1st. That some of the phenomena in dispute are proved to occur, and that upon independent, it might almost be said hostile, testimony.

2nd. That the charges of imposture and delusion are negatived to the extent of the ground traversed by the experimental committees.

3rd. That the phenomena proven are of a character so curious and so opposed to the usual developments of force, that they cannot primarily be regarded as unimportant, pending a fuller knowledge in regard to their nature and origin.

4th. That although no explanation of the phenomena sufficient to cover the case has been arrived at through the experiments instituted, so, on the other hand, there has been no sufficient negation of spiritualistic theories.

5th. That the occurrence of the phenomena does not depend upon any belief or disbelief concerning them.

6th. That there are but very few *professional* mediums, and that mediumship, so called, appears to be a somewhat widespread gift or condition claimed and practised, quite irrespective of pecuniary considerations, by numbers of persons in every rank of life.

7th. That no backwardness has been found upon the part of the spiritualists in submitting their claims to investigation.

8th. That although urgently invited, none of the supporters of the imposture and delusion theories submitted themselves as witnesses.

9th. That, as a party, the ranks of spiritualists are found to be

by no means wanting in education, talent, accomplishments, and general credibility.

If these propositions but approximately reflect the truth, it is clear that the public now stands in an entirely new relation to the subject. It may be urged that in the matters of causation, philosophy, theory, &c., but little ground has been gained, and that many of the phenomena have yet to be endorsed. But, on the other hand, it must be conceded that these latter have not been negatived; and that as a necessary sequence the theoretic department naturally falls into a subsequent stage of investigation.

The way, however, is paved by the great fact ascertained that phenomena really exist for elucidation, and a more respectful attention is fairly earned for whatever may yet require examination.

For the sceptic then, this subject has taken an enormous stride. Phenomenally it is now removed from a condition of suspicious partisanship and is elevated by an unsectarian inquiry into a region of fact meet for the further research of the scientist, psychologist, religionist, or philosopher. Indeed, the worth of this famous investigation can hardly be over-estimated as a starting point for renewed inquiry, and its moral can scarcely be better conveyed than in the concluding words of the report itself:—"Your committee, taking into consideration the high character and great intelligence of many of the witnesses to the more extraordinary facts, the extent to which their testimony is supported by the reports of the sub-committees, and the absence of any proof of imposture or delusion as regards a large portion of the phenomena; and, further, having regard to the exceptional character of the phenomena, the large number of persons in every grade of society and over the whole civilised world who are more or less influenced by a belief in their supernatural origin, and to the fact that no philosophical explanation of them has yet been arrived at, deem it incumbent upon them to state their conviction that the subject is worthy of more serious attention and careful investigation than it has hitherto received."

Turn we again to those other reviewers who have failed to note, or endeavoured to hide, the enormous ground gained in this subject, that we may ascertain *their* treatment of the report and their claim for the position of censorship they have assumed. With but very few exceptions, the investigation has been treated with a dishonesty, a flippancy, and an inconsequence well nigh beneath contempt. One fact however is prominent, viz., that the subject for the moment so thoroughly interests the public that it has been impossible to pursue towards it the ordinary tactics of total suppression. Failing this, derisive, unphilosophic, and garbled reviews have served to obscure the questions raised, to ignore the facts revealed, and to misdirect the public mind, so to prevent that further investigation which, if pursued, will unfailingly expose the small qualification possessed by their authors for the affected leadership of thought and opinion on this debateable subject.

Unable to cope with the circumstance that some of the phenomena persistently denied have been actually endorsed by unpledged, indeed by sceptical, investigators after painstaking and repeated experiment; the reviewers have fallen back upon the old assertions of "fraud," "hallucination," "worthlessness of the manifestations," &c., &c.

With an assumption almost astounding, they have not scrupled to call in question the intelligence and observant powers of a number of gentlemen to whom they for the most part must have been utter strangers, but whose high character and social standing is better ascertained than their own, and whose status as clergymen, lawyers, physicians, and scientists would imply more than average qualifications. Has it never struck these leaders of opinion (!) that such investigators must necessarily have been forewarned and forearmed in regard to the possibilities of fraud and delusion, and that the very labour upon which they entered was, in intent, the detection of imposture? So marked, indeed, is the hostility to the results recorded (elemental though they be), and to the recorders thereof, that one is driven to the conclusion that no compliment could have been too high—no pæan of praise too intense for the self-same investigators, had they but have been careful to have taken the side of unexamining incredulity rather than that of truth and conscientiousness.

Again changing their ground, the inquiry has been voted worthless, because experimental seances of but twelve months' standing have not testified to the greater marvels which years of record have accumulated for the spiritualist. Thus there is an admission of the very phenomena primarily denied and urged impossible of demonstration,—an admission, however, only made for the purpose of asserting their inherent triviality.

Putting aside the inconsequence of this position, what possible warrant can there be for thus anticipating an answer to one of the questions propounded for solution? The actual investigators, with all the collected data before them, have not thus prejudged the case, for they at any rate felt, that apart from a full knowledge of the source, nature, and incidence of the manifestations, to have asserted their unimportance would have been absurd and a begging of the whole question. It would, however, be very easy to show the hollowness of this assumed appraisalment. The very phenomena now decried, were, some twenty years ago, the wonderment of the world, when as the "Rochester rappings," they appeared among a small and obscure community. Notwithstanding that the said manifestations have since become of almost universal occurrence, they now, as then, defy any elucidation of general acceptability. Meanwhile, however, a numerous party has grown up who assert for them a relationship to a large family of phenomena of the most varied pretensions, and who claim for them a source of unparalleled significance. Curiously enough, this party has no special bond of union, but has been gathered from every section of the civilised world irrespective of kindred impulses or beliefs; while

in this country it exists as units scattered broadcast rather than as focussed into a society or organisation, and numbers many secret sympathisers. Surely then, does an immeasurable importance attach to phenomena so potent in effect, and surely this is hardly the time to dismiss them from consideration as mere trivialities.

In recognising the proven existence of phenomena a step is gained towards any estimate of their value, and if such commonplace incidents as the fall of an apple or the vapourising of boiling water have led to whole revolutions in science, who can say that the automatic movement of a table may not imply a mode of force capable and worthy of utilisation?

Much has been made of alleged errors of theory, philosophy, and belief said to accrete around an acceptance of the phenomena. But again, it must be urged that such considerations should be postponed, and can really exist as assumption only until more is known of the phenomena under investigation. And if surrounding error is to be pleaded as a bar to investigation, then it may be asserted that none of the phenomena known to science could ever have been accepted at all. Chemistry is a case in point, a department of science daily reaching to a higher phase of precision, but none the less the result of centuries of error. If we oftentimes arrive at good through our experiences of evil, so no less to reach truth do we press through and clear away the encumbering error. Error, whatever its nature, is an argument for, and not against, inquiry, and imposes upon the investigator an additional responsibility, its subsidence becoming but a matter of time and experience when once a point of contact is established between the mind and truth.

The animus of the reviewers is further manifested in the prominence they have given to the adverse reports which, by the suppression of all the explanatory notes, they have endeavoured to nurse into an importance by no means their due. But what of these reports, or of the failure of the least persevering of the sub-committees? Their undeterminate character is sufficiently exposed by their mere juxtaposition to the other reports, while the impartiality of the inquiry is placed beyond all dispute by their inclusion in the volume. The very failure of some of the sub-committees to obtain manifestations has a corroborative value, for no facts have been better ascertained than that the phenomena cannot be commanded at pleasure, and appear to depend upon most subtle conditions. Each of the successful committees had occasional seances without result, but total failure was the lot only of the unpersevering. Of the two individual reports denying the phenomena, it is notorious that the authors had or took but few opportunities for the experimental investigation accomplished by others, as the book itself discloses. The attempt, therefore, to make the tale of inadequate investigation do duty for the story of hard work and perseverance by the more diligent members is after all but a sorry expedient, which only need be noticed as a means of estimating the

general worthlessness of the critiques—a worthlessness the more apparent now that day by day the facts ascertained by the successful sub-committees are being verified by totally independent investigators.

Were this an article on the nature of evidence and the credibility to be attached to phenomena of unusual character, it would be easy to show (upon the trumpery arguments and premises set forth to discredit so-called spiritual manifestations), that not a murderer could ever be convicted upon such testimony as over and over again has consigned the criminal to the gallows. Millions of the community have never seen a murder committed, nor do they know any one who has. May not therefore the excitement, the flight, and the blood-stained appearance alleged of the prisoner by an eye-witness be but an imagination, a case of unconscious cerebration, a something wholly subjective. 'A shot, perhaps, was fired—but what of that? This but makes the evidence still more unreliable. The nerves would be shocked, and the mind would become excited to an abnormal expectancy, and would be the more ready to conjure up images of blood and horror. Gentlemen of the jury, "while we admit the high character, honour, and trustworthiness of the witness," we are sure you will not upon *such* evidence, consign the prisoner at the bar to a felon's doom, but will send him out of the dock without a stain upon his character.'

This is a specimen of the reasoning too frequently applied to the phenomena of Spiritualism; for, amongst other theories, we are gravely asked to accept "expectant attention" or "unconscious cerebration" as solutions sufficient for the multifarious manifestations occurring not only to spiritualists, but also to investigators after investigators who have approached the inquiry, anxious to expose the alleged wonders, and determined to apply with rigour every such theory. Boldness is not only excusable, it is even desirable in the formation of theoretic solutions; but progress towards proof cannot be expected while the fashion is maintained of speculating upon the explanation before the thing to be explained is sufficiently examined. There is a distinct difference between the fitting of theories to phenomena and of phenomena to theories, and this has yet to be recognised both by the public and spiritualists. The subject however, will not yield to reviewing or to newspaper theorising. Eminently it is one for the investigator, and no better plea for investigation exists than the lamentable ignorance so lately displayed by the press.

In conclusion, it is hardly probable that any one solution will meet the case of phenomena alleged to be so varied. Should even the spiritualist be right, his triumph will be one only of degree; for, should an agency of disembodied spirits be ever proven, it seems difficult to escape from the conclusion that there may be also latent possibilities of the embodied mind, only now in process of development. Nor should the investigator by any means put fraud and delusion out of the account. Their occasional admixture is not

only possible, but likely, while quacks remain among doctors, hypocrites among religionists, perverters among critics, and society teems in every department with parvenus and pretenders. Spiritualists, however, need no apology at the hand of a mere investigator, for they are better able to answer for themselves. Their issue with the sceptic is a simple one notwithstanding its importance. They but argue that as in the material universe an all-permeating union is found; so, in the world of mind, from its lowest to its highest developments, is there a like universal connection of which physical death is no real severance. To them spiritual communion thus presents no inherent improbability, and proofs of its existence they affect to find running through all history as well as in the every-day manifestations now so controverted. They further argue that this communion is so influential for good or for evil, its action and re-action so determinate and so governed by the progress of humanity or of the individual on either side of the grave, that it is a factor too important to overlook in the problem of human existence. In any case, they feel that they dare not withhold facts, and while they are willing to submit them to rigid scrutiny, they neither fear nor expect to escape misrepresentation and criticism.

INVESTIGATOR.

NOTE.

In reprinting (by request) the foregoing paper, the author would endeavour to make good its deficiencies by directing inquirers to useful sources of information upon the phenomena and philosophy of Spiritualism.

"FOOTFALLS ON THE BOUNDARY OF ANOTHER WORLD," by Robert Dale Owen, is a work of much research, written in a philosophical spirit. It treats of "Hauntings," "Apparitions," "Dream-warnings," and other phenomena of apparently spontaneous character, or occurring without the agency of "Mediumship," as generally understood. Each section is illustrated by well-chosen and remarkable narratives, the nature, authenticity, and probabilities of which are carefully analysed. "PLANCHETTE, OR THE DESPAIR OF SCIENCE," by Epes Sargent, records comprehensively the various phenomena of modern Spiritualism, and gives an interesting *resumé* of the many theories entertained as to their nature and origin.

As strongly corroborative of the results attained by the Committee of the Dialectical Society, and as showing the relation of scientists to the phenomena in question, three pamphlets by William Crookes, F.R.S., the well-known spectroscopist and chemist, are especially worthy of notice, viz.:—(1) "EXPERIMENTAL INVESTIGATIONS ON PSYCHIC FORCE;" (2) "SPIRITUALISM VIEWED BY THE LIGHT OF MODERN SCIENCE;" and (3) "PSYCHIC FORCE AND MODERN SPIRITUALISM," a reply to the *Quarterly Review* and other critics. The labours of this painstaking investigator are well nigh conclusive as regards the occurrence of the physical phenomena, but cannot yet be considered as sufficiently matured to dispose of the questions of intelligence and causation.

The five works just named, together with the Report of the Committee of the Dialectical Society, make out a most important case for investigation; but for those who may wish yet further to pursue the literature of the subject, the following volumes may be mentioned as covering several of its departments, whether spiritual, sceptical, or religionistic:—"JUDGE EDMONDS ON SPIRITUALISM," being a narrative of experiences in trance and writing mediumship, prefaced by a weighty and judicial introduction; "CONCERNING SPIRITUALISM," by Gerald

Massey, one of the latest works, and valued by many Spiritualists for the distinction therein drawn between normal and abnormal mediumship; "THE DEBATEABLE LAND BETWEEN THIS WORLD AND THE NEXT," by Robert Dale Owen, a work addressed to the religionists of Christendom; "THE HISTORY OF SPIRITUALISM," by Mrs. Hardinge; "HINTS FOR THE EVIDENCES OF SPIRITUALISM," by M. P.; "AFTER DEATH, OR DISEMBODIED MAN," by Randolph; the works of Andrew Jackson Davis and Hudson Tuttle; and Mrs. De Morgan's "FROM MATTER TO SPIRIT," the result of ten years' experience in Spiritualism, but chiefly interesting to the investigator on account of its introduction, from the pen of Professor De Morgan, the eminent mathematician. These and other relative works and periodicals may be obtained at Burns' Library, 15 Southampton Row, Holborn, W.C., London.

No amount of reading, however, can take the place of actual experiment; and this may be achieved wherever parties or committees of from four to seven members can conveniently be formed, pledged to regularity in attendance at meetings, and determined to abide by an orderly and persevering system of investigation.