

GHOSTS: WHAT ARE THEY?

BY PROFESSOR ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE.

IN the *Arena* for February, Dr. Wallace has a paper entitled "What are Phantasms, and why do they appear?" Dr. Wallace clings to the orthodox theory of ghosts, viz. that the apparitions which appear from time to time to communicate information ought to pay a more or less friendly call upon their relatives, and are in very truth none other than the spirit forms of the dead. He tells some good ghost stories. As illustrating the impossibility of the telepathic hypothesis of communication between living persons, take the following instance of the experience of Mrs. Storie, of Edinburgh, who one night saw in a dream her twin brother knocked down by a train, after which she saw a railway compartment in which sat a gentleman she knew, the Rev. Mr. Johnstone. She afterwards learnt that her brother had been run over and killed by a train at the moment of her dream, and in the train Mr. Johnstone was seated. But as her brother could not possibly have known Mr. Johnstone was in the train, Dr. Wallace argues that this knowledge could only have been acquired by her brother after death. He also tells a story of the Yorkshire vicar in New Zealand who was saved from drowning by hearing a voice saying to him before going to bed, after arranging to be called next morning by a boating party, "Don't go with those men." He asked, "Why not?" The voice answered, "You are not to go." He asked, "How can I help it? They will call me up." The voice replied, "You must bolt your door." He did so. The party rattled at the door in the morning, but he lay still, and they went away without him. A few hours afterwards he heard that the whole party had been drowned. Dr. Wallace maintains that it was a spirit-friend who foresaw the catastrophe and interposed to save the vicar's life. From these and other acts, Dr. Wallace regards it as proved that the spirits of the so-called dead still live, and that some of them, under special conditions and in various ways, make their existence known to us. What reasonable explanation, he asks, can we give of the causes and purposes of these phenomena? First of all he frankly admits that most of their communications are trivial and commonplace. This is due to the fact that the majority of those who die are trivial and commonplace, and that the production of these dreams, impressions, and phantasms may be as a special exercise of their lost spiritual faculty, as agreeable to some spirits as billiards, chemical experiments, or practical joking are to some mortals. Secondly, some spirits are condemned to haunt the places where they committed crimes as a kind of penal servitude, even continuing to reproduce some incidents connected with it. Thirdly, good and benevolent spirits wish whenever possible to give some message to their friends. Dr. Wallace's conclusion on the whole matter is that if we look upon these phenomena not as anything supernatural, but as a perfectly natural and orderly exercise of faculties and powers of the spiritual being for the purpose of communication with those still in the physical body, we shall find every objection answered and every difficulty disappear. This is a hard saying, for it leaves untouched the great difficulty, which indeed it suggests, viz. why in the nature of things should these communications be so very occasional and accidental? Surely the number of recorded cases in which the spirits of the departed have appeared to reassure the living of their continued existence bears no proportion at all to the number of benevolently disposed spirits who would certainly have made such communications if they had only had the chance.