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[p. 1083]

‘Miracles and Modern Spiritualism.’¹

It is a very distasteful task to attempt to analyze the recent productions of Mr. Wallace and Mr. Crookes on the subject of what they call “spiritualism.” Both are men of scientific attainments and reputation in certain branches of technical knowledge, and the authority earned by their acquirements in certain departments of natural science is necessarily exerted to some degree when they write on the subjects to which they here call attention. Moreover, their style of writing borrows the forms of scientific treatment in a way which has not failed to give a spurious importance to their records and conclusions. Few people are perhaps sufficiently acquainted with the literature to which Mr. Wallace appeals to recognize the feebleness of the bases of his argument, and only physiologists can appreciate the incoherence of the results placed on record by Mr. Crookes. Such books coming from such authors have a certain gravity, and while the general mass of spiritualistic literature has its claims to contempt branded on the face of it, these have an aspect of calmness and accuracy which makes them dangerous and therefore worthy of exposure.

Mr. Wallace is the more voluminous, speculative, and erudite author; Mr. Crookes is the more severely experimental and absolutely paradoxical. There is no means of verifying or even of criticising some of the statements of either author. Of Mr. Wallace it must be noted that he swallows without hesitation nearly everything historians, physiologists, and psychologists have agreed to reject as incredible in the records of ancient and of modern history. He begins by a little “refutation of the arguments of Hume, Lecky, and others against miracles.” To the argument, for instance, that “If a man tells me that he saw the lion on Northumberland House descend into Trafalgar square and drink water from the fountains I should not believe him; if fifty men or any number of men informed me of the same thing I should still not believe them,” Mr. Wallace replies in effect that no collective number of sane and credible persons ever did report as fact that which did not exist. He therefore goes at once to the conclusion that “the facts of witchcraft are not disproved but are proved,” and “are supported by a whole body of analogous facts occurring at the present day.” Passing on to the stale fallacies of the “odic force” of Reichenbach, he revives the worn-out follies of that mixture of imposture and self-deception as realized truths; clairvoyance—which, after making the tour of the world and leaving everywhere the trail of trickery and weakness, has almost ceased to be remembered even as a juggler’s trick—he accepts as a solemn and instructive truth. Mesmerism and that almost forgotten failure “phreno-mesmerism,” the engrafted branching of one folly upon another, he includes in his roll of demonstrated scientific facts; and to leave out nothing of the wildest of forgotten fallacies, he solemnly revives the ridiculous stories of Mr. Rutter’s “magnetoscope,” in which “a decillionth of a grain of flint and a billionth of a grain of quinine caused motion” in a pendulum at a distance; stories which, although first eagerly grasped as a sort of support of homœopathic infinitesimal dilutions, were speedily discredited and disproved even by the respectable homœopaths of the day. A characteristic example of Mr. Wallace’s critical method is seen in his way of treating “the case of Jacques Aylmar (temp. 1692), whose powers were imputed by himself and others to the divining rod, but which were evidently personal.” This case, Mr. Wallace says, “is one of the best attested on record, and one which indisputably proves the possession by him of a new sense in

some degree resembling that of many other clairvoyants.” Jacques Aylmar’s case he takes from Mr. Baring-Gould’s “Curious Myths of the Middle Ages,” and he learns there how Aylmar and his “diving rod” managed to procure the conviction and execution of an alleged murderer. Mr. Baring-Gould, indeed, in treating of this “curious myth,” adds that subsequently Aylmar was subjected to examination at Paris, that he was detected in trickery, was proved to be “an impostor” and suffered “exposure and downfall.” “But how,” asks Mr. Wallace, “does this in the least affect the question?” That he was afterwards shown to be an impostor and a cheat does not affect his prior credibility or that of the witnesses who testified to his wonderful doings; and “we must therefore conclude that the murder was really discovered by Jacques Aylmar in the manner described, and that he undoubtedly possessed some equivalent to a new sense in many respects resembling the powers of some modern clairvoyant.”

Approaching “spiritualistic phenomena” in this spirit, it is not surprising that Mr. Wallace finds nothing “too hot or too heavy.” He considers the evidence of Valentine Greatrak’s cures by stroking to be overwhelming, and he can see in them nothing more incredible than in the story accredited in medical works that two men who were told during a cholera epidemic that they had been sleeping in the beds of cholera patients died of fear and with choleraic symptoms. His accounts of “spiritualistic phenomena” are replete with the usual monotonous trivialities—chairs and tables bumping up and down (always chairs and tables, a sofa or a sideboard would be a welcome variety), or, as a change, “a table moving about in a strange, life-like manner, turning its claws first on one side and then on another.” The appearance at the summons of interested exhibitors of the weary spirits of the dead for the mere purpose of identifying themselves by the sort of testimony so abundantly produced on behalf of the Claimant—the naming of some trivial incident which it is supposed “no one else could have known”—all this Mr. Wallace recounts as gravely as if neither Maskelyne, the Davenports, nor Foster had ever appeared on the public stage. Mr. Home’s legerdemain with cinders is set down as a distinct evidence of his power to control and disturb the laws of nature, and to bid a hot coal alternately to burn a newspaper and illuminate without singeing the venerable locks of Mr. S. C. Hall when laid among them.

Of course, we come presently to the question which most people impatiently ask themselves: If we are to believe that the half-a-crown paid to Mrs. A., B., or C. can indeed secure for us the attendance of Socrates, Franklin, or Sampson at pleasure, as is proved by “the testimony of thousands,” are we also to believe that they come chiefly to rap with sharp points on tables, to shake chairs, pinch ankles, and tell the patient “operators” in exchange for their crowns their own names and the names of some of their friends living or dead? Every sane person at once feels that here is a primary crux of the credibility of the whole fabric of “spiritualism.” So also do its least reasonable adherents; and Mr. Wallace, who is among the most cultivated and ingenious, meets the difficulty at length. He falls back upon the absurd and incoherent ravings of some of the “trance-mediums;” in these he finds evidence of inspired eloquence and the foundations of “a new religion.” Thus we learn that “clairvoyance, clair-audience, prophecy, trance, vision, psychometry, and magnetic healing” are “gleams of power full of glorious promise of what we shall be”—that we shall be spirits “occupying a spirit world extending around this world;” that we shall “have advanced *one step* beyond humanity;” that we shall, however, have “the form of human beings and occupations analogous to those of earth,” and certainly, “not either wings or golden harps.” Next, that theologians have been greatly in error in excluding wit and humour from the Christian’s heaven: spirits are very much given to practical joking and to efforts of pleasantry, which would in beings not advanced “*one step* beyond humanity” be considered as evidence of very feeble and

ill-cultivated intellects. It is very unpleasant to have to touch grave subjects in such company, but we should not do justice to the seriousness with which Mr. Wallace puts forth this nonsense as among the “moral teachings” of spiritualism which vindicate its claims to consideration if we did not add his announcement that the spirits tell him that “of God they really know no more than we do.” It is distressing to have to record the publication of such a farrago of old fallacies and new follies by a man who has such claims to consideration. Coming from ordinary sources such a book could do no harm, and might be interred in silent contempt; but from Mr. Wallace such a contribution to English literature cannot be passed unnoticed.

With Mr. Crookes we may deal more shortly. Much of his book is the reproduction of old accounts of his physical experiments with Mr. Home: these are now as stale as they are unprofitable, and the book itself honestly shows, by the correspondence which it publishes, that Professor Stokes and Sir C. Wheatstone gave him clearly to understand that they regarded these experiments as incapable of proving anything. Sir C. Wheatstone writes:—“It does not offer an iota of proof in favour of your doctrine of psychic force, or any disproof of the effect not being mechanical.” There is, however, an appendix of some new matter. We have here the romance of Katie King. Katie King is the supposed “spirit” who for a considerable period accompanied a Miss Cook, who appears to have taken up a good deal of Mr. Crookes’ valuable time, spent in “studying her.” Miss Cook used to lie on the floor in the dark, with her head covered, and Katie King, the supposed spirit, who was singularly like Miss Cook, would walk about and talk meantime. There seems to have been a good deal of doubt in sceptical minds as to whether Katie King and Miss Cook were not one and the same person, making ingenious use of a dummy. Katie King, the spirit, was found to be most suspiciously solid; in fact, when she came to have great confidence in Mr. Crookes, and allowed him to embrace her, he was satisfied that she felt quite like ordinary flesh and blood. Ultimately, she came to have very great confidence indeed in Mr. Crookes; then, while the form of Miss Cook was lying in the dark with her head muffled, Katie King would gather the children round her and “amuse them by recounting anecdotes of her adventures in India.” One evening he even “timed Katie’s pulse; it beat steadily at seventy-five,” and on “applying my ear to Katie’s chest I could hear a heart beating rhythmically inside.” “Tested in some way, Katie’s lungs were found to be sounder than her medium’s.” So that now we know that the spirits who are “one step in advance of humanity” have blood like ours, which is, like ours, circulated by a heart of complex construction, giving the same sounds and pulsating with the same rhythm; that they have lungs which, like ours, are made up of air-cells receiving air and expiring it in the same manner. Of course it is unnecessary to say that all this implies a precise physical identity in the nutrition and waste of the body, and that spirits are not such airy stuff as dreams are made of, but very flesh as our flesh, and no spirits at all. All this Mr. Crookes, with great detail, sets forth, and with it notes endless particulars, which he asks reasonable people to accept upon his evidence. They convince him that this solid, breathing, pulsating flesh was an apparition and not a self-convicted human cheat, who made of him a self-convicted dupe. We can hardly conceive of any reasonable being who can in his wildest imaginings suppose that here was a “spirit” of solid flesh, who was breathing an oxygenated atmosphere, circulating blood nourishing a solid body, whose valvular heart was beating, whose vesicular lungs were expanding and contracting, whose arteries were distributing red blood and veins returning blue blood, in whom physical waste and repair were in full progress, and who must therefore eat, drink, and sleep like other beings of ordinary humanity. This is folly beyond all measure.

¹ “Miracles and Modern Spiritualism.” By Alfred Russell Wallace. (London: James Burns. 1875.) “Phenomena of Spiritualism.” By William Crookes, F.R.S. (London: J. Burns. 1875.)

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.