

SOCIAL SUBJECTS.

MODERN SPIRITUALISM—THE CONDUIT STREET GALLERY—THE EXHIBITION OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS.

IT may be truly said that it is an extremely curious fact that in eminently practical days like these in which we live, when scepticism on all things, human and divine, is paramount, when criticism is remorseless in the application of its canons, when the principle of utilitarianism so widely pervades politics and society, what is generally known as Spiritualism should have gained so many adherents; and, in spite of the strong improbabilities—nay, impossibilities—it puts forward as its credentials, should have made for itself a well-defined position. The traditions which have governed the religious world so long seem to be fading away. The Mosaic account of the creation of the world and the origin of man are relegated to the domain of Hebrew poetry. The story of Noah and his Ark, and the waters of the Deluge, are placed among the fables which an imaginative philosophy evolved for purposes of its own: the notion of the sun and moon standing still in order that a battle might be completed is dismissed as absurd in the face of known physical laws; and the ancient marvels that absorbed the thoughts of our childhood, when reading the Old Testament, cease to command the admiration of our more enlightened years. The inexorable and relentless research of German thinkers has sapped the foundations of the miraculous history of Christianity; and French and English disciples of the schools of Strauss, of Bauer, of the doctors of Tübingen, have permeated Protestantism and convulsed Catholicism. In vain Evangelicism shrieks

out its watchword of the Divine Inspiration of the Bible; in vain a Vatican council proclaims the infallibility of the Sovereign Pontiff. The waves of unbelief surge on, to break at last upon that eternal shore of whose depths and soundings neither Orthodoxy nor Heterodoxy can predicate anything as absolutely certain. But now, to the amazement of all who read and reflect, another religion, vague and undefined as yet, appears, and calls for our allegiance; and, for want of a better name, calls itself Spiritualism. It has no creed, no formulas. It has no past history. It is devoid of any system of rewards and punishments; it offers no solution of the great mystery of the origin of evil; it projects no theory of the Deity; it knows nothing of any hell or heaven; but yet it calls upon the public to believe in it. On what grounds? Merely because its professors are acquainted with certain phenomena which are beyond the experience of ordinary life. These phenomena chiefly consist in the exhibition of strange facts, which apparently set at defiance the laws of gravitation and what is known popularly as the principle of the lever. It is urged, and with considerable force, that the Christian Church relied upon the supernatural powers of its founders for the evidence of its Divine origin; and therefore the professors of Christianity should not hastily disregard the evidence of phenomena which cannot be satisfactorily explained. The fervent Protestant may exclaim that the age of miracles is past; but this is to

beg the question. The Catholic may urge that these strange signs have about them no mark of the divine; but their argument is weak, for they must allow that strange things do happen, when they regard the liquefaction of the blood of S. Januarius, and recognise the substantial truth of the story of the Sacred Heart. Besides, have not saints mysteriously received the *stigmata*? and were not S. Francis or S. Dominic seen to be raised from the ground in a state of ecstasy? Obviously, no religion can claim for itself a monopoly of miracles.

The latest defence of modern spiritualism has appeared where it was least likely to be found, namely, in the pages of the 'Fortnightly Review.' Mr. Alfred R. Wallace has entered the lists under the auspices of the most unsympathetic of periodicals. It is scarcely likely that the hard-headed and thoughtful editor of the 'Fortnightly' is a believer in Mrs. Guppy; but no one who knows his candour and broad intelligence can be surprised that he admits what promises to be an important controversy in a by no means unimportant matter to a philosophical ventilation in the columns over which he presides. At the commencement of the present year Lord Amberley wrote an article in the 'Fortnightly,' entitled 'Experiences of Spiritualism,' in which the whole thing was denounced as an imposture and a cheat. Then Mr. Dunphy wrote a paper in 'London Society,' which pointed to a very different conclusion; and Mr. Wallace contends that Mr. Dunphy has a better right to be believed than Lord Amberley, and he briefly gives his reasons. Lord Amberley assisted at five *séances* which do not appear to have been very successful, while Mr. Dunphy has a

much wider experience. Lord Amberley jumps at his conclusion, while Mr. Dunphy merely states his facts. Under 'an imperative sense of duty,' Mr. Wallace now undertakes the defence of spiritualism.

It is not my purpose now to go into a detailed criticism of Mr. Wallace's statements and theories. I have not space to do so; nor would it be fair, for Mr. Wallace's argument will not be concluded till these lines are in print. Still, I may say that, so far as he has gone in his historical sketch of spiritualism, and in his narration of facts, he has adduced nothing whatever to convince me that the phenomena related are due to the intervention of the souls of the dead, or that, to use his own phrase, spirits, as distinguishable from substantial human force, are the 'intelligent cause of the phenomena.' I have never been present at a *séance*,* and therefore I will not dispute the accuracy of the apparent facts. I am quite willing to believe that tables are moved without the application of external force, for I have seen a tree torn from its roots, but I never saw the wind that overthrew it. I have not the slightest doubt that 'mediums' have been seen to float in the air, for equally heavy bodies can poise in the atmosphere hundreds and hundreds of feet above the surface of the earth with no perceptible action to sustain them, and we have no exhaustive knowledge of the laws of gravitation. I admit all Mr. Wallace's facts, unreservedly if he pleases, though I own to a professional weakness

* It would be better if FREE LANCE *did* attend a few *séances* before resuming this subject. Scepticism that rejects inquiry becomes bigotry, and we must have a good reason for forming our opinions before we can expect the public to adopt them.—ED. 'LONDON SOCIETY.'

for cross-examination; but I am compelled, also 'under an imperative sense of duty,' to resist his conclusions, namely, that these abnormal manifestations are the work of *spirits*.

For it does not require very deep reflection to confess that we know nothing whatever about spirits, and that the very term 'spirit' merely implies an unknown quantity. We talk about space, and universe, while we are perfectly aware that we have no adequate conception of either. We speak of eternity and infinity, but they are only terms which language has invented for the purpose of exchanging thought on subjects which are beyond the grasp of human intelligence. Spiritualists do not venture to go beyond the expression of their argument, that the phenomena they witness can only be accounted for on the theory that they are performed by supernatural agencies, and that they think that these agencies are to be imputed to the spirits of the dead. And they go on to say that these phenomena are strong proofs of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. But if they would consent to subject their theories to severe logical examination, they could not fail to see that their arguments, in a ratiocinative point of view, are very feeble. They come to this: a ponderous article of furniture is moved across a room without any visible agency. As it is contrary to all experience that such an effect can occur without apparent and explicable cause, we maintain that it is effected by the superhuman energy of the spirits of the dead. But to this the objector may fairly reply that a century ago nobody would have believed that it was possible to travel at the rate of seventy miles an hour, or that the result of a

boat-race on the Thames could be known in Calcutta and New York as soon as it is known in Bristol; and our ancestors might just as reasonably have urged that no such effect could have been caused without the agency of the spirits of the dead. Now, we know nothing whatever about the state of the departed. No record or tradition, strangely enough, exists of what Lazarus said and did after he had been summoned from the tomb; nor are there any ancient legends about those weird resurrections at the hour of the Crucifixion. Among all the strange romances that have emanated from the human brain, not one, as far as I am aware, has ever ventured to deal with the land beyond the grave. And therefore, when the spiritualist contends that the phenomena he witnesses are caused by the spirits of the dead, we cannot resist the conviction that the process of reasoning he puts forward is wholly arbitrary, and entirely unsatisfactory. He simply substitutes one difficulty for another. He places the world upon the shoulders of Atlas, but leaves poor Atlas no place to stand on. And we may fairly ask him whether he has any real reason for supposing that the spirit, when separated from the body, has greater power to move a heavy sofa across a room without the application of muscular force than when it was joined to the body? May we not ask him, further, whether what he calls the 'medium' may not possess some as yet imperfectly comprehended power which may be shown to be a sufficient explanation of the undoubted phenomena? I shall return to this subject next month.