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Are Spectres with Us? 1887-12

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ARE SPECTRES WITH US?

Mysteries of Life Turned Up Through Psychical Research.

HALLUCINATIONS AND DREAMS.

Growsome Show of the Black Cat at the "Tavern Club."

THEOSOPHY AND CHARLATANISM.

[BY TELEGRAPH TO THE HERALD.]

BOSTON, Mass., Dec. 20, 1887.—"What my weird black cat will do will be a revelation to the Tavern Club I guess," said Dr. Richard Hodgson with a quizzical smile, making a few light passes of his hand over the electrified fur of the cat in his lap.

The creature lay rigid as if in catalepsy, with legs stiffly outstretched and awkwardly bent. His eyes were open and gleamed coldly in the firelight with an unwinking stare at the visitor. He was long and lank and ribbed like an ancient mariner. An uncanny beast surely. Poe had such a one in his eye which the murderer in his tale bricks up alive in the crypt with his victim.

"Perhaps you would like to look through him," suggested the Doctor, suddenly seizing the cat by the scruff of the neck and thrusting him tail foremost toward his caller, who bent forward and through a tube passing from stem to stern caught the glint of the white teeth in the cat's mouth.

"That is my speaking tube," explained the Doctor, "and when that cat is properly hung on an invisible wire and duly electrified I think he will make some remarks in a way that will unsettle the hair of the youth in the Tavern Club. You see we have to enliven psychical research once in a while by a good old fashioned materialization."

"Kloot! kloot!" chimed in voices behind a sofa.

"Don't move," said the Doctor; "that is only part of the actors in my show for the Tavern Club—two live pigeons that support my star, the cat."

"Where is Erer Rabbit? Surely you don't intend to leave him out of a psychical animal show?"

"Of course not," said the Doctor, gravely. "Here he is," and, sitting the act to the word, he jerked a great stuffed rabbit by his hind legs from a basket under the table. "We spare no pains to make the show complete as far as it goes," continued he, flinging the rabbit on the table. "And in the grave matters of our inquiry we shall do the same," he continued, settling himself back in his arm chair, and diverting his thoughts instantly to the work before him.

Dr. Richard Hodgson is a man rising forty apparently, of tall, soldierly figure. His well shaped head, full at the brow and crown, is firmly set on his strong, square shoulders. His hair is brown, and his brown beard, trimmed with a touch of daintiness, is cut cavalier fashion. His brown eyes have a frank, direct, wide awake look that gives the impression of mingled force, sound wits and good humor. Whatever such a man undertakes he will do with his heart in it and do well.

MADAME BLAVATSKY'S CHARLATANISM.

What he has already done in the line of his chosen research speaks for him. An early member of the English Society for Psychical Research, it was he who went to India for the sole purpose of tracing Madame Blavatsky to her mystic lair and getting behind the veil of her pretensions if he could. He succeeded in stripping them off to his own satisfaction, and to that of a great many others doubtless who have read the full and convincing report of his investigations.

To him Mme. Blavatsky is now simply a clever charlatan and the sparkling dust which she throws in the eyes of her infatuated believers seems to him very common Indian sand.

Returning to England and continuing his inquiries he came thence to this country and in cosy rooms on Boylston place, the narrow recess that faces the old graveyard border of the Common, he is now preparing and sending out thousands of circulars to further the ends of the American society. The council could have no more competent and efficient agent.

What is the object of this Society for Psychical Research?

It is described in the first article of its constitution as "the systematic study of the laws of mental action." It has so far undertaken five lines of research, divided at present between five committees:—

- On Thought Transference.
- On Apparitions and Haunted Houses.
- On Hypnotism (Mesmerism).
- On Mediumistic Phenomena.
- On Experimental Psychology.

The general supervision of the investigations is in the hands of a council comprising some of the foremost names in their several departments of science in this country.

The officers for the present year are four vice presidents, Professor Henry P. Bowditch, M. D., and Professor Charles S. Minot, of the Harvard Medical School; Professor George S. Fullerton, of the University of Pennsylvania, and Professor Edward C. Pickering, of the Harvard College Observatory; a treasurer, Mr. C. C. Jackson, of Boston, and Secretary and assistant treasurer, Richard Hodgson. In the council are Dr. W. S. Bigelow and Dr. Prince, of Boston; Professors Bowditch, Pickering, James and Royce, of Cambridge; Professors Newcomb and Langley, of Washington; Dr. Joseph Jastrow, of Baltimore, and others of equal reputation.

LATEST WORK UNDERTAKEN.

and typical. Now take a waking vision or a vivid dream.

"In this city not long ago a lady woke with a start, trembling, and thinking that she had just seen her brother, with his hands and clothes dabbled in blood. So strong and moving was the vision that her nerves were unstrung. She could scarce dress herself, but at length, going down to breakfast, she told the story of her dream at the table. Her husband tried to reassure her, but she could not be comforted, and insisted on going to her brother's house as soon as breakfast was over. At the house she found him quietly sitting at his library table turning over papers, and her instant relief was so complete that she thought no more of the dream of the morning and said nothing about it. After a brief chat she proposed to go out on the lawn and play tennis.

"You will have to count me out for a few weeks," said her brother. "One of the children was climbing on the roof of the conservatory this morning while I was below. By a careless movement he put his foot through the glass and a big piece fell edge-wise on my leg, cutting an artery and making the blood spurt all over me. Fortunately, I was able to stop the flow of blood, but I am tied up for some weeks, as the doctor tells me."

"Never before had the sister suffered consciously any hallucination or vision of the kind."

SUMMONS BY WILL POWER ALONE.

"Now a step further. From dream land or the border land of waking, come to the broad daylight and full consciousness."

"I have a letter here from a foreman in a printing office in Cincinnati. A few weeks ago, while at his desk, he became filled with the fancy to see whether he could use his will power to move some one in the room without speaking or beckoning. He picked out a proofreader who was standing with her back toward him, and with all his power that he should turn round and come to him. He put into his mental appeal all the concentration possible; but the reader did not turn her head, and after a few moments he gave up the trial as a mortifying failure. Half an hour later, perhaps, when he had forgotten for the time his attempt, the proof reader came to him and asked him whether he had wanted to see her before, that morning."

"Why?" said he.

"Well," she said, "about half an hour ago, when I looked up I saw you, as I thought, standing not more than two feet from me, and looking at me very intently. I was about to speak to you when the form vanished, and I saw it could not be you. But your face and figure appeared so plain and distinct that I would have known you anywhere. What it was I do not know, but after trying to laugh off the impression I could not keep from coming to you and telling what I had seen."

"Neither the man nor the woman has any leaning toward Spiritualism that we know of, and they do not pretend to interpret the case."

"A second instance which they send is one in which the same man heard a voice but saw no person from whom it could have proceeded, while the woman saw a figure standing at the point from which the voice seemed to come, but, strangely enough, could hear no voice."

PERSONALITY PROJECTED A DISTANCE.

"How do you explain that case?" asked the reporter.

"I do not profess to explain it; I simply state it," replied Dr. Hodgson. "Let us go further still—to wilful projection of personality and recognition of it by others."

"A gentleman of well known social standing, whose case has been furnished to us, determined to use his power as far as possible to affect others at a distance, and singling out two ladies of his acquaintance of the first social position and character, wished to be present in their company and to make them conscious of it if possible. The ladies awoke from an afternoon nap almost at the same instant, and both saw a figure which they instantly recognized as that of their friend standing by their bedside. After a moment it disappeared, but the impression was so vivid that both wrote to members of the society and to the friend in question. Thus we have an independently recorded instance."

"A second trial was made by concert, the gentleman notifying the ladies that he should, without warning, at some time endeavor to project his personality, and would communicate his presence by signs agreed upon, taking the hand of one and stroking the hair of the other. The letters of the gentleman and the ladies crossed, avowing the attempt and acknowledging its success. Both ladies at the hour named by the gentleman in his letter were conscious of his apparent presence and of a pressure on the hand and hair, clasping the one and stroking the other. The letters are preserved and in evidence."

RECOGNITION OF PROJECTED SELF.

"Now for the top round of the ladder, so to speak—the conscious projection of self and recognition of and by others."

"You are coming now into the inner circles of the theosophists, aren't you, Doctor?" inquired the reporter.

"Well, we do not premise the circles," was the answer; "we leave that for the cyclists. We are simply searchers after new light and attainable facts. There will be time enough to theorize when facts enough have been gathered to warrant surmises or conclusions. We have instances of alleged conscious projection from attestants who are not theosophists or spiritualists or anything else ending in ist. Take, for instance, this letter from a well known and widely respected clergyman, whose name I am not authorized to disclose. He declares upon his honor the fact of a wilful projection of self and recognition of the person whom he wished to see—a lady to whom he was attached."

IMPRESSIONS MAINLY OF DEATH.

"About what period or incident in life do these visions or hallucinations or impressions chiefly cluster?"

"About death usually, or distressing emotional crises. We have letters from correspondents reporting vivid consciousness or impressions of the sufferings of their friends, ranging as far as visions of the sufferers lying on beds sobbing and groaning. Of course many coincidences are likely to occur where the vision and the poignant suffering were simultaneous. In such cases there is no little danger that the impressions will be unintentionally heightened by later communications confirming the vision. This must be guarded against, and in all cases the record should be made, when possible, immediately upon impression."

"Of course the visions of dying men are rarely communicated or expressed in such a way as to be free from probable delirium. This is an evident block in the way of their reception for scientific study. And the visions of relatives or friends upon the death of one they loved are commonly occasioned or accompanied, at least, by the knowledge of the deadly peril or death of the loved one. Upon nervous organizations strong impressions of this kind often create manifest hallucinations of the brain and actual delirium."

WHILE HE LIVES, UNRECORDED.

"The present interest of the public and of the *HERALD*, Doctor," said the reporter, after the field was cleared by a few modest personal reminiscences and details touching the society, "is concerned chiefly with the latest work that you have undertaken—the research of the Committee on Apparitions and Haunted Houses."

"This work is only just begun," said the Doctor, "and the returns are not yet what we hope and may justly expect to receive. We have members of our society in every section of this country and in Canada, and we rely on their co-operation and collections, to a great extent. But most of them are professional and busy men, who have to seize leisure to assist us, and we must, of course, wait their convenience in forwarding our inquiries. We shall be very glad of the co-operation of the *HERALD* in extending our appeal as widely as possible and trust that every reader who has had the experience called for will put himself in communication with the society by addressing me, at No. 5 Boylston place, Boston, Mass. I am now sending out on behalf of the committee an appeal, hundreds of which have already gone out, asking that 'any person having some unusual experience, such as an exceptionally vivid and disturbing dream or a strong waking impression, amounting to a distinct hallucination, concerning another person at a distance, shall immediately and without waiting, for further investigation state that fact on a postal card or in a letter, and mail it to the secretary, Richard Hodgson, No. 5 Boylston place, Boston, Mass."

"My collection of material on this subject," continued the Doctor, "was begun long before the despatch of the present circulars, and many members of the society have prosecuted similar inquiries and have usually communicated to me the results. I have already on file, therefore, a large number of hallucinations, or vivid impressions or visions, as you may please to call them, many of which are certainly extraordinary."

"Without attempting at present to account for them—and bear in mind that the avowed object of our society is research rather than interpretation—I will single out some of the most striking, and the readers of the *HERALD* can weigh them for themselves. I should premise that in every instance which I shall give, so far as we have been able to ascertain, the persons impressed were of high character and more than ordinary intelligence."

COINCIDENT SUFFERINGS.

"On June 17 of the present year a well known lady of this city had what was apparently a violent attack of neuragic toothache, something to which she was entirely unaccustomed. And coupled with the intense pain was a strange feeling of dissociation—as if it were not herself that was suffering, but another in some strange way united but not fused with her own personality. She spoke to several of the pain, and strange consciousness and notes of it were made at the time by members of our society. Nearly three weeks afterward a letter was received from her sister in Europe, dated June 23, describing her own attack of neuralgia on the 17th, and declaring it to be so violent that she felt as if her head was thrust in an iron cask. We have a copy of the letter. No letter from the sister here could have possibly reached the one in Europe before the letter of the 23d was mailed, and both correspondents are of undoubted character."

"Was this an isolated coincidence?"

"Take another, then. An English woman of position and intelligence, naturally free from superstitions, became impressed with the conviction that for every thunderstorm that broke over her head one of her immediate family or close friends would die very shortly thereafter. Repeated instances without an exception so weighed upon her that the breaking of a storm affected her to tears. She went at length to a physician and submitted her case. It was agreed that note of the next storm should be made and sent him on the very day of its occurrence. A few days later he received word from the lady that a very dear companion—a friend who had lived in the same family with her for nearly thirty years, died suddenly a day or two after the storm. Separated at the time, there had been no communication between the friends and no thought of possible illness. The physician who sends this case to the English society remarks cynically that there is still a chance of further verification, for the English woman has yet a brother and a cousin left alive."

VIVID DREAM VERIFIED.

"These cases, you understand, are characteristic

of what is then, what is being investigated."

"Is there, then, no such thing as an actual ghost or apparition or perispirit or astral body?"

"How can I say yes or no? Is not that a question into which we are inquiring. If you ask me for my individual opinion, I will say that I fully believe in thought transference, in the affection, that is, of the mind of another, distant from the agent, it may be, by the transmission of volition. That is as far as I now go. At present the greater part of the scientific world corrals ghosts, astral bodies and the like within the ring fence of hallucination. But the Society for Psychical Research will receive and entertain ghosts gladly."

"Would it lay aside its name, as did the great house of Valois, if it should really see a ghost, as the apparition of the murdered Princess Henrietta of England was seen by her successor, the second wife of the Duc de Valois?"

"No, not necessarily, though our research would then reach a climax which we dare not at present anticipate. We can only look forward at present to the receipt of reports about ghosts and lively hallucinations."

"What are the causes of most hallucinations and disturbing dreams?"

"Blood movements in the retina occasioned by changes of warmth or of light in the sleeping chamber, or shock of some kind, or nerve affections from within. As to the hypotheses of changing quantities of acid in the brain, or congestion caused by misdeeds, or the position of the body in bed, or pressure on the jugular vein I am not prepared to speak. It might be worth while to investigate the influence of pressure on the veins or arteries of the neck in generating dreams and visions if it could be conducted systematically."

DREAMS ARE ONLY SHORT.

"What of the duration of dreams?"

"Very short, I think, in most cases. You remember the experiment of Sir William Hamilton for testing the length of his dreams by ordering his servant to awaken him at short intervals."

"Dr. Myers, of the English Psychical Research Society, repeated the same experiment substantially by riding when very tired on a railway with stations at short intervals. He would thus fall asleep and awake as the train came to a stop, to fall asleep again between the stations. He found that his dreams passed with wonderful rapidity, verifying the old story of the dream of Mahomet."

"When do dreams or hallucinations chiefly occur?"

"Just before waking, as a rule. Ordinary dreams are simply confused reveries joining recollections and phantasmagoria. Their extraordinary vividness is chiefly due, I think, to the lack of the usual counterbalances and correctives furnished by common sensations—impressions from the external world—which serve as necessary contrasts and measures."

"Are the eyes commonly open, or partly so, when one is dreaming?"

"Very possibly; though of that I cannot speak with assurance. We lack sufficient instances to form anything like a satisfactory induction. I know that Thomson speaks of dreams that wake before the half shut eye, but he does not give references."

"How about the alleged enlargement of real objects in dreams, expressed, for example, in the lines of Antony and Cleopatra, where 'tis said, 'If there be or ever were one such it's past the size of dreaming?'"

"That might follow, as you see, from the same cause of which I spoke as contributing to vividness—the lack of distracting or balancing sensations."

"Does age or sex have any influence in modifying the character or amount of dreams? Do old men as a rule dream dreams, while young men see visions, as noted by the prophet Joel?"

"As to these points I cannot say. They remain to be investigated by the curious, and doubtless will be some day, but we cannot include them within the lines of our present research."

"What foundation is there for the superstition or prevalent impression that dreams go by contraries?"

"Experience. People have learned that dream gifts usually failed to materialize, and it is a good pretext also for thrifty lovers and husbands to avoid the necessity of fulfilling dreams of a new bonnet or an opera box. As a rule, under these two pressures, we may safely conclude with Rory O'More that 'dramas always go by contraries, my dear!' But this does not affect the zeal of our search after hallucinations."