

I.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE GENERAL MEETING ON

July 16th, 1888.

The twenty-eighth General Meeting of the Society was held at the Westminster Town Hall, on July 16th, 1888.

THE PRESIDENT, PROFESSOR HENRY SIDGWICK, IN THE CHAIR.

The President delivered the following address:—

It had for some time been my intention to take this opportunity—this being my first formal address to the Society since I became President a second time—to survey briefly the course that our Society has travelled since its foundation in 1882; to recall what we proposed to do and compare it with what we have done; to ask if we have realised our aims, and so far as we have not realised them, why we have failed:—and then, turning from the past to the future, to consider the work that now lies before us, and our prospects of accomplishing it satisfactorily. To me it appears that we have reached a crisis in our history—not perhaps a very critical crisis, rather one likely to be prolonged and mild—but yet a crisis of which it is important that we should thoroughly understand the nature, in order that we may guard against the dangers it involves.

This I had intended, and this I still propose to do, though I find that the subject is too large to be included within the limits of a single address; and I shall therefore reserve an important part of what I proposed to say for another occasion. But I little thought when I formed my plan, that the past I proposed to survey would be divided from the future by such a chasm as now divides it in the minds of us all—through the calamity that has deprived us of the colleague and friend who had so large a part in shaping the lines of this past. Of the irreparable nature of this loss it would be impossible for me to say what I feel, without tending to spread a discouragement which I would rather wish to overcome—since our cause was never more in need of hopeful and vigorous exertion. Nor do I propose now to characterise more particularly Edmund Gurney's share in the work of the last six years. A careful and full estimate of that will be given in the next number of our *Proceedings*, by the colleague who is of all the best

qualified to give it. In my survey this evening I shall speak generally of "our" work; but it will be present throughout to your minds as to mine how largely this is the work of a vanished hand,—a hand whose combined vigour and delicacy, and trained skill and indefatigable industry, we must miss at every turn of the further labour that lies before us if we are to complete our task.

To pass, then, to my survey.

When we—that is, the group of inquirers to which I belong, for I do not of course presume to speak in the name of the whole Society—when we took up seriously the obscure and perplexing investigation which we call *Psychical Research*, we were mainly moved to do so by the profound and painful division and conflict, as regards the nature and destiny of the human soul, which we found in the thought of our age. On the one hand, under the influence of Christian teaching, still dominant over the minds of the majority of educated persons, and powerfully influencing many even of those who have discarded its dogmatic system, the soul is conceived as independent of the bodily organism and destined to survive it. On the other hand, the preponderant tendency of modern physiology has been more and more to exclude this conception, and to treat the life and processes of any individual mind as inseparably connected with the life and processes of the shortlived body that it here animates.

I do not, of course, say that all scientific men affirm the non-survival of the soul: I speak only of general tendencies, and that it is the general tendency of modern science to exclude the thought of this survival, I cannot doubt.

Well, the division and conflict thus established between religion and science has long given serious concern to thoughtful minds; and many intellectual methods of reconciling the conflict have been tried; but still, speaking broadly, it remains, a great and prominent social fact of the present age.

Now our own position was this. We believed unreservedly in the methods of modern science, and were prepared to accept submissively her reasoned conclusions, when sustained by the agreement of experts; but we were not prepared to bow with equal docility to the mere prejudices of scientific men. And it appeared to us that there was an important body of evidence—tending *prima facie* to establish the independence of soul or spirit—which modern science had simply left on one side with ignorant contempt; and that in so leaving it she had been untrue to her professed method, and had arrived prematurely at her negative conclusions.

Observe that we did not affirm that these negative conclusions were scientifically erroneous. To have said that would have been to fall into the very error that we were trying to avoid. We only

said that they had been arrived at prematurely, without due consideration of the recorded testimony of many apparently "competent witnesses, past and present,"—to quote from our original statement of objects.

This testimony, then, we proposed to examine, to the best of our ability, according to the rules of scientific method. Here I must pause to say a word in explanation of the meaning we attached to this term "scientific," on which some emphasis was certainly laid in our programme, as it has exposed us to attacks from two opposite directions. On the one hand we were told somewhat roughly from the materialistic side that being just like all other fools who collected old women's stories and solemnly recorded the tricks of impostors, we only made ourselves more ridiculous by assuming the airs of a scientific society, and varnishing this wretched nonsense with semi-technical jargon. On the other hand, Spiritualists have more politely indicated a certain offence at what has seemed to them a pretension of intellectual superiority to the many educated persons—some of them of scientific repute—who had already been convinced by the evidence we were preparing to examine.

But, in truth, in using such words as "scientific" and "research," we had no idea of claiming special qualifications; our only wish was to characterise precisely the ideal of procedure that we set before us. Our point was not that we *were* scientific, but that we meant to be as scientific as we could. We meant to collect as systematically, carefully, and completely as possible evidence tending to throw light on the question of the action of mind either apart from the body or otherwise than through known bodily organs; we meant to collect and consider it without prejudice or prepossession, giving the fullest and most impartial attention to facts that appear to make against the hypothesis that the evidence at first sight suggested; and in particular we meant to examine with special care, in each department of the inquiry, the action of the causes known to science that presented themselves as possible alternatives to our hypothesis:—since only a rigorous exclusion of such known causes could justify us in regarding as scientifically established the novel agency of mind acting or perceiving apart from the body, or otherwise than through the known organs of sense or muscular motion. "Science," as an eminent man has said, "is only organised common-sense"; and it appeared to us that the rules of procedure that I have described were the obvious dictates of plain common-sense, assuming our object to be simply that of arriving at the truth.

This, then, was the general conception of our work. Let us now consider how far we carried out our ideal, and to what extent experience led us to modify our original view of the subject.

First, it will be seen by a reference to our original distribution of the subjects of inquiry, that the different parts of it, in our first view of them, grouped themselves in a manner quite different from the arrangement that further investigation led us to adopt. We had already recognised the importance of that "influence which may be exerted by one mind upon another, apart from any generally recognised mode of perception," which was afterwards called "telepathy"; and we had formed a separate committee to investigate hypnotism. But we had not yet recognised in the hypnotic trance a specially important source of telepathic phenomena—as we afterwards came to regard it; and we still kept to the popular view that classifies apparitions at the moment of death with ordinary ghost stories.

It was only by degrees—chiefly from the accumulating evidence of similar apparitions occurring in illnesses or other critical times of life, besides the great crisis of death—that we were led to view these death-wraiths as a special case of telepathic impressions:—and in so doing we were strongly influenced by the remarkable evidence which we obtained of such apparitions being produced by design and experimentally. I cannot but think that the force of this experimental evidence for telepathic hallucinations—which, though limited in amount, is good in quality—has been overlooked by some of our critics. Thus, then, was formed that notion of one complex group of telepathic phenomena which we called *Phantasms of the Living*. The advantage of this grouping was that evidence of various kinds,—partly experimental, partly spontaneous, partly obtained in a normal state of consciousness, and partly in the hypnotic trance—was made to converge on one general conclusion; the novelty of which, from a scientific point of view, appeared to be conveniently suggested by the novel word "telepathy." This conclusion involved the view that death-wraiths are hallucinations telepathically caused; and on this point we have been charged with violently forcing the facts collected into the mould of a preconceived theory. I venture, however, to think that this charge is unfounded, and that the amount of theory introduced by us is the *minimum* required to enable the facts which we regard as established to be conceived apart from assumptions which we regard as unwarrantable—at least at this stage of our investigation. We must regard a death-wraith as a hallucination, so long as we have no reason for supposing its appearance to be caused by the action on the retina of some kind of matter filling the space which the apparition seems to occupy; and this supposition would be clearly extravagant. On the other hand, if we regard the hallucination as causally connected with the death, we must attribute it to some occult action of the embodied mind, until we have obtained adequate evidence that disembodied minds are possible agents; and we do not yet think that we have

obtained such evidence. And this and no more is the amount of theory implied in our term telepathy.

The statement of the case for telepathy is, as you know, the chief positive result of our six years' work, so far as the central problems are concerned which it was the primary object of the Society to deal with. And I would now point out that throughout the investigation which led to this statement it was our endeavour to apply thoroughly our principle of carefully studying the possible known causes of the phenomena which we were inclined to attribute to an unknown cause; so that we might only accept as evidence experiences in which the operation of such known causes appeared either impossible or highly improbable. The application of this principle was, of course, different in different parts of the evidence. Putting deliberate fraud aside, what we had to guard against in the experimental thought-transference was unconscious signalling; and it soon became clear that, where contact of hands was allowed between percipient and agent, genuine thought-transference could be simulated to a striking extent by delicate muscular or tactile sensibility in the percipient, interpreting indications given unconsciously by the supposed agent. It is to this process that professional performers, like Mr. Stuart Cumberland, have for their own purposes given the name of "thought-reading"; and it appears from a popular novel of the present season that educated persons still exist who suppose this muscle-reading to be what we call telepathy:—whereas the special point of our investigation was the care with which this unconscious signalling was excluded.

In dealing with the spontaneous cases—especially the apparitions of distant persons corresponding to deaths or other crises—the problem of exclusion of known causes was fundamentally different. There could be no question as to whether the correspondence was due to such causes in any regular way: the only question—assuming the accuracy of the narratives—was whether it was due to accidental coincidence. We had, in fact, to deal with a problem in the theory of probabilities: and to solve this it was necessary to know approximately the frequency of hallucinations similar to those that are *prima facie* telepathic, and not due to recognised disease.

This was a point which the scientific discussion of hallucinations had hitherto left quite obscure; we had to determine it entirely by our own statistical investigations, before proceeding to calculate our chances. Now I understand that to some persons interested in our general inquiry all this calculation of chances seems pedantic and superfluous: they think that once it is granted that we have well-attested first-hand cases in which A sees an apparition of B precisely when B dies—having never seen any other apparition—no man of common-sense can doubt that the correspondence cannot be due to

mere chance. And if caused hallucinations of sane persons not apparently ill had been as rare as I, at least, supposed when we began our investigation, I think this would be true. But, unfortunately for our argument, statistical inquiry showed them to be comparatively numerous—probably some thousands occur in England every year—far more numerous than the hallucinations which there is any ground for attributing to telepathy. This being so, it seemed to us that the question whether the latter could be chance coincidences went beyond the range of common-sense, and rendered careful calculation necessary—especially considering the inevitably unscientific character of most of the observations collected—I mean that they were not made at the time of the occurrence with careful attention by persons aware of the fundamental importance of exact and full statements.

And this view was confirmed by the reception of *Phantasms of the Living*. For though we have secured respectful attention to our case, and I believe persuaded several thoughtful persons to accept telepathy as a working hypothesis, there are others, who at least desire to be impartial, who consider that our evidence is inadequate to sustain the conclusion. I do not myself agree with these critics. I adhere to the general conclusion of the authors of *Phantasms*; but I admit that, in the present state of the evidence, the question is one that requires a careful estimate of considerations difficult to determine with any exactness.

And this leads me to what I spoke of at the outset as a crisis in the history of the Society. I always hoped, as one of the most valuable results of the publication of *Phantasms of the Living*, that—by gaining for our subject the serious attention of a much larger number of persons—we might secure that a good proportion of the fresh cases of spontaneous telepathy would be carefully noted with full detail at the time, and brought to the notice of our Committee; so that in the course of a few years more we might get together a body of fresh first-hand evidence in every way superior in quality to most of what we have yet published. And I am somewhat disappointed that this expectation has not yet been realised. I am inclined to think that this may be partly because our own members, and the friends of our movement, are under the impression that the business of collection in this department was considered to be completed when *Phantasms of the Living* was published; and that if the sceptics are still unconvinced after the heap of cases that we have laid before them, there is no use offering them any more—for in fact they will simply not look at it. And I should quite agree with this, so far as evidence of an inferior quality is concerned; I think myself that there is little use in adding to our stock of second-hand or remote cases. But my point is that if our hypothesis is true, we ought to be able to get evidence first-rate in quality of the telepathic

cases that are continually occurring ; and that if we do not get it, then, as time goes on, the absence of such evidence will constitute an argument of continually increasing strength against our conclusions ; it will be said that if the fresh cases had really occurred—as according to our hypothesis they must be supposed to occur—we should certainly have been able to ascertain their occurrence. I therefore venture to urge, with all the emphasis at my command, that a combined effort should be made by all who are interested in our inquiry to stimulate the observation and recording of these fresh experiences ; I cannot doubt that they are to be found, and I hope that whenever they are found they will be sent to me as Editor of the *Journal*—or to Mr. Myers or Mr. Podmore as Secretaries of the Literary Committee. I give again the assurance which we have always given, that, so far as may be desired by those who communicate with us, the names of persons and places and any other details that may be wished, will be kept strictly private.

And I may say that the view I am urging—of the need of renewed and sustained energy in the collection of fresh telepathic cases—was fully shared by the colleague whom we have lost : to whose rare intellectual gifts and unflagging zeal the respectful attention that we have gained for our positive conclusions is, as we all feel, mainly due. It was Mr. Gurney's intention, in the course of the autumn, to prepare an abridged popular edition of the argument and evidence set forth in *Phantasms of the Living*, in the hope of thus widening the area of serious interest in our inquiry, and proportionately increasing our prospect of obtaining careful records of new experiences. And I hope that this, as well as other parts of his scheme of future work, will still be carried out—though they must now be carried out by other hands.

One word in conclusion as to the remainder of my survey which I am obliged to reserve for a subsequent meeting ; I had hoped to say something of our—especially Mr. Gurney's—researches in the region of what I may call orthodox hypnotism : I mean such phenomena of the hypnotic trance as are admitted even by unpsychical physiologists ; and I had designed also to explain and justify our method of dealing with other departments of our inquiry, in which we have not arrived at a final conclusion on the main issues, though I venture to think that we have produced results of real value, and indispensable as a basis for further investigation. But all this must be for another time. I will only say now that our interest in these other departments of inquiry is unabated ; and if I have put prominently before you, as a subject for combined and concentrated effort, the completion of the telepathic investigation, it is largely because I feel sure that it is in this department, if any, that we shall first win the acceptance of the scientific world generally. And I desire to obtain their adhesion, not from any concern

for fame, or because I care for the opinion of men, however eminent, who have never given serious attention to our subject, but because we are in pressing need of additional workers possessing scientific ardour and trained scientific faculty. If we could once get the conclusions of *Phantasms of the Living* accepted—I do not say universally, but by the younger and more open-minded part of the scientific world, we might fairly expect a rush of ardent investigators into the whole subject which will leave no department unexplored. And, believing what I do, I cannot see why this should not be achieved. It may be too sanguine to say that it will be achieved; there may be unknown invincible obstacles; but we may at least hope for this consummation and work for it.