SPIRITUALISTIC IMPOSTERS.

How Poor Human Nature Likes to be Fooled.

SOME OF THEIR SHALLOW DEVICES

Those who Fool Themselves—Electricity as a Medium—Spiritualists of the Olden Time—The Developments in the Dis Debar Case.

Spiritualism and Like Delusions.

By Dr. Allan McLane Hamilton.

The revelations of a recent sensational trial are suggestive and amusing as evidences of the virility of a popular delusion and its influence upon a number of intelligent people. The chief victim is an experienced and supposedly clearheaded lawyer, who is tricked by the shallowest of devices, and the list of dupes includes many well-known men and women, who, fearful of ridicule, have so far kept in the background, leaving their priestess to her fate. One of them was actually so gullible as to pay a large sum for the restoration by celestial sculptors of a mutilated piece of statuary, while others without question accepted portraits of dead friends—painted by "spirits" with artistic proclivities—some of which portraits would undoubtedly have caused the originals to turn in their graves, provided they had had during life the least particle of self-respect or artistic feeling.

Much of this credulity arises from the unaccountable love of the occult and mysterious which seems to be an integral part of our mental make-up, common both to the educated and the ignorant, and it would almost appear that if the cultured individual were more credulous than his less favored brother, it cannot be denied that he is more obstinate in the retention of his fixed ideas when he has one. There is undoubtedly no delusion so difficult to remove as that of a popular nature, especially when it directly concerns the deluded one's environment and personality. Medical men daily meet with instances which severely tax their faith in the existence of any such thing as common sense. The learned college president or clever railroad operator clothes himself with disease-defying armor supposed to be electric, but which, nevertheless, does not cause the slightest deviation of the galvanometer needle, or they seek the assistance of ignorant men and women who thumb greasy playing-cards or lapse into fictitious trances and guess more or less shrewdly as to the health or business affairs of their clients. The records of a comparatively recent will case show that no less a person than the late Commondore Vanderbilt was in the habit of sending a lock of his hair to a quack in another city, who made a diagnosis thereon; and persons of unquestionable sanity are content daily to go through with the mummery of a supposed faith-cure. An ingenious and enterprising "Cancer Doctor" in Central New York sells to his dupes ordinary pieces of paper to be applied to the offending parts, after he has rubbed them until they are sufficiently electrified to become attached to the wall, a demonstration which is usually sufficient to convince the patient.

The subject of Spiritualism, which immediately concerns us, is but one phase of a mental state which has probably existed for all time, and a discussion of its antiquity would lead us into an interminable history, in which the early Scriptural instances of the vision of Job and the Witch of Endor play a conspicuous part; the mental epidemics mentioned by Hecker, and the state of agitation at a subsequent period which was marked by the epidemics of St. John and St. Vitus are more recent evidence of the outbreak of general popular delusions.

Modern Spiritualism dates back only to about 1716, when nine persons of the family of John Wesley all had communications with disembodied souls by means of raps; and in 1825 Justinius Kerner described an outbreak of the spiritualistic craze in Germany, which in many respects resembled that detailed by Adams, who wrote about the perturbations of the Wesley family.

About forty years ago we find our own unfortunate country invaded; but the familiar so-called manifestations of the Fox family need but the briefest mention. During the spring of 1848, the good people of Western New York were set agog by the wonderful tales of the Pulvers and Foxes, and these, so far as we know, were the first manifestations of Spiritualism in this country. The pretended discovery of a murder by means of spiritual direction was enough to inflame the public mind to an intense degree, and the apparent substantiation gave an air of reality which brought the Spiritualists many converts. Two men named Bush and Granger, with one of the Foxes, in obedience to the commands of the "spirits," began digging in the cellar of the latter, in which the rappings had been heard, and after penetrating the soil about five feet, a plank was reached; when this was torn through, the auger, which was loose in the handle, fell out of sight. A further search revealed the presence of bones and hair, which were supposed to have belonged to a human body; but there is no absolute proof of this fact, and it is quite reasonable to suppose that the presence of these things was quite accidental, and under any ordinary circumstances would have had no significance beyond that the house was probably built upon the site of a graveyard or shambles. In fact, this incident and many others had a decidedly suspicious coloring.

Shortly after this time the people of the entire central part of New York state gave themselves up to the most extraordinary behavior. Each town had its "circles," and no less than eighty mediums presented their claims for recognition in the small city of Auburn alone. The state of fanaticism and folly, the mob violence and the wild and unreasonable behavior approaching fatuity, of the many people whose daily life was governed by supposed spiritualistic direction, resembled in degree that of any of the forms of popular craze of the middle ages more than anything else. Fortunately the better sense of the community asserted itself, and after awhile law and order prevailed; the pretended communications were proven to be wholly false, and the popular mania subsided. Despite the fact that we ocasionally find such exhibitions of folly as that referred to at the beginning of this article, the belief in spiritualism and the behavior of its followers is much more moderate than it was thirty-five years ago. The courts are occasionally called upon to interfere where a will has been made by a "believer," but the true mental status of the spiritualist has by this time been pretty well established.

A mere belief in spiritism does not affect the ability to make a last testament or contract, any more than the acceptance of the miracle of the immaculate conception as a truth, or others of a disputed nature. It is only when a man's delusion is an insane one, and when it is clearly associated with intellectual perversion of a morbid type, and what is known to alienists as insane, that the court must take cognizance and protect the individual and society. If a believer is commanded by the spirits to do some act of violence—to "remove," as Guiteau expressed it, certain persons he believes obnoxious; to commit some unjust action; or if he is so weak-minded as to become the prey of designing persons—then his mental state is certainly one requiring attention. The tolerance of the courts in regard to popular delusions is, however, to say the least, remarkable. Some years ago a well-to-do Frenchman named Bonnard died in the city of New York. He was a firm believer in the doctrine of metempsychosis, and when his will was opened it was found that he han left a very large sum to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. A contest naturally followed, but the will was admitted to probate, the surrogate holding that the act of the dead man was consistent, inasmuch as his soul would find a tenement after his demise in the body, possibly, of some canine waif who might receive the protection of the society in question. While savoring of the wisdom of Solomon—and in a legal sense this decision was undoubtedly a logical one—it probably would have been found, on careful examination, that the testator's delusion was associated with others of an insane character.

It is interesting and suggestive to discover the changes in the methods of dishonest spiritualists, and to find how scientific progress has so materially aided them in their forms of deception. The clumsy rappings of the last generation are things of the past, and instead of being produced by anatomical peculiarities of the joints, and mechanical contrivances placed within the shoes of the medium, they are now readily and simply evoked by a small electrical helix, armature and sound-board, connected with wires passed through the table legs and terminating with a "key" controlled by the operator, while storage batteries and small incandescent lamps furnish a better supernatural light than the more unsatisfactory etherealized solution of phosphorus or luminous paint. Besant's amusing satire of Herr Paulut, who completely discomfitted the non-progressive spiritualists at the seances of his credulous patron, and brought to his aid the resources of modern legerdemain and mesmerism, through a creation of fiction, is hardly an exaggeration; and Herrmann, Kellar and Hertz nightly and unostentatiously reproduce the slate, folded paper, and other tricks which in the hands of Slade and those of his ilk continue to mystify the would-be deceived.

One of the most successful forms of deception consists in the exhibition of "spirit pictures." When these are not produced by actual substitution, or what is known to the profession as "palming," chemistry lends its useful aid to the perpetration of the fraud. The well known property of certain colorless salts to assume color when saturated with equally colorless solutions of other salts, is often made use of by the spiritualistic fraternity. A picture painted with a solution of the lead-acetate will immediately become black when it is mostened with some fluid containing a sulphite. Silver salts, too, have properties which are exceedingly curious, and a photograph treated by a mercuric solution, disappears, to return when moisted with a solution of the iodide of potassium. Perhaps, one of the most flimsy impositions is that of spirit photography, two negatives being taken. One of these contains an opaque likeness which, by a very great stretch of imagination upon the part of the credulous individual, may be supposed to resemble the face and figure of some dead friend or relative, and the other is a simple photograph of the sitter. When these two negatives are superimposed and the print is made, it will be found that the result presents the dim outline of a ghostly figure hovering above the living subject. With the proper amount of sleight of hand this trick may be made to deceive persons who possess little or no knowledge of chemistry or photography. The cases that interest us, however, are not those in which common fraud plays a conspicuous part, for these are sufficiently familiar to the average newspaper-reader, or to any one who has paid any attention to the subject.

The examples of which I wish to speak are those where the possessor of the delusion is perfectly honest and sincere; and this very sincerity and simple-mindedness must always appeal to our pity. No matter how much we may feel inclined to hunt down the so-called mediums who are responsible for the demoralization, and expose their rascality, it is difficult to entertain for the dupe any other feelings than those of compassion. The consistent possessor of a delusion of spiritualism should not be ridiculed any more than the impressed witness of the frequently repeated miracle of the liquefaction of the blood of St. Januarius, or the devout Catholic who has witnessed the vision of Our Lady of Lourdes.

No person is free from a certain reverence for the mysterious and unattainable; it is this very quality that gives most of us the comfort of religion, or, on the other hand, brings us under the dominance of false beliefs which are more or less injurious. Rochefoucald says:

On est faux en differentes manieres. Il y a des hommes faux qui veulent toujours paraitre ce qu'ils ne sont pas. Il y en a d'autres de meilleure foi, qui sont nes faux, qui se trompent eux-memes, et qui ne voient jamais les choses comme elles sont.

This explains much. It may be added that there are many whose vanity leads them not only to the development, but jealous defense of their very delusions.

The creature of morbid imagination, either with the assistance of some stronger mind, or simply by a method of his own, with the sensuous reward it brings, is very likely to develop false beliefs, which may very easily become deep seated delusions. Braid, Mesmer, Carpenter, Fere, Charcot, Beard and others have fully shown the importance of that condition of intellection known as "expectant attention," in which the subject becomes to all intents an automaton susceptible to the impressions from without, the responsibility being suspended for a time, as the higher centers of the brain lose their power of control.

A survey of the development of all religious beliefs and forms must impress the philosphical observer with the important part this mental state plays, and this is especially the case in those religions where emotional excitement predominates.

Many of the alleged communications which honest believers in spiritualism have, are the result of some disorder of the organs of special sense, or of the brain itself, but it is not necessary that actual disease should exist. An active imagination, with sufficiently developed "expectant attention," or fixation of the mind upon one subject, will easily lead the susceptible person into a declaration of the reality of his false perceptions. Galton, an observer of great originality, has experimented and described some very curious mental states, when healthy persons, by a simple effort will, could conjure up visions of the most varied description. He thus remarks to some inquiries made by him as to the prevalence of visionary memory:

I was greatly struck by the frequency of the replies in which my informants described themselves as subject to visions. Those of whom I speak were sane and healthy, but were subject notwithstanding to visual presentations, for which they could not account, and which in a few cases reached the level of hallucinations. This unsuspected prevalence of a visionary tendency among persons who form a part of ordinary society seems to me suggestive and well worthy of being put on record. The images described by different persons varied greatly in distinctness; some were so faint and evanescent as to appear unworthy of notice; others left a deep impression, and others again were so vivid as actually to deceive the judgment. All of these belong to the same catagory, and it is the assurance of their common origin that affords justification for directing scientific attention to what many may be inclined to contemptuously disregard as the silly vagaries of vacant minds.

There are many historical instances of illusions and hallucinations among persons of great intellectual vigor, and I may be pardoned for referring to a strange fact, which is not generally known, in regard to the late President Lincoln, and this is recited by Wharton. Mr. Lincoln was remarkably superstitious. Just after his election in 1860, when he came home tired out, he threw himself upon a lounge in his bedroom, which was opposite to a mirror. "When he looked into the glass he saw himself reflected nearly full length; but his face had two separate and distinct images, the tip of the nose of one being about three inches from the tip of the other. He was a little bothered, perhaps startled, and got up and looked in the glass, but the illusion vanished. On lying down again, he saw it a second time—plainer, if possible, than before; and then he noticed that one of the faces was a little paler—say five shades—than the other. He got up, and the thing melted away, and in the excitement of the hour he forgot all about it, nearly, but not quite, for the thing would once in a while come back again; but he never succeeded in bringing the ghost back after that, though he once tried very industriously to show it to his wife who was worried about it somewhat. She thought it was a 'sign' that he was to be elected to a second term of office, and that the paleness of one of the faces was an omen that he should not see life through the last term." Nor was this a single case of morbid cerebral action in the life of this remarkable man. "He was," says his biographer, Mr. Lamon, "readily impressed with the most absurd superstitions. He lived constantly in the serious conviction that he was himself the subject of a special decree, made by some unknown and mysterious power, for which he had no name. He had great faith in the virtues of the 'mad-stone,' although he could give no reason for it, and confessed it looked like superstition."

There are many other instances of illusion and hallucination, most of which are familiar—notably that of the Great Napoleon, who saw his star upon the eve of battle. I may call attention to an English case unknown to many, which belongs to a class which is suggestive of a very common sort of fatuity. Doubtless it has done service in another way, and has been made use of by the spiritualists:

A young lady used to play on the harpsichord while her lover accompanied her on the harp. The young man died, and the harp remained in her room. After the first excess of her despair, she sank in the deepest melancholy, and some time elapsed before she could again sit down to her instrument. At last she did so, gave some touches, and hark! the harp, tuned alike, resounded in echo. The poor girl was at first seized with a secret shuddering, but soon felt a kind of soothing melancholy. She became firmly pursuaded that the spirit of her lover was softly sweeping the strings of the instrument. The harpsichord from this moment constituted her only pleasure as it afforded to her mind the certainty that her lover was still hovering about her. One of those unfeeling men who wanted to know and clear up everything, entered her apartment; the girl begged him to be quiet, for at that moment the dear harp spoke most distinctly. Being informed of the amicable illusion which overcame her reason, he laughed; and, with a great display of learning, proved to her by experimental physics that all was very natural. From that instant the young lady grew melancholy, drooped, and soon after died.

There are numerous recorded cases of disturbed functions dependent upon actual disease of the brain. Epilepsy is responsible for many curious examples, and so are other equally obscure cerebral disorders. I may refer to a case in which the very real hallucination followed the commonplace agency of a good dinner and too much wine.

We were on a visit at N——, in Nottinghamshire, and had dined with a most respectable surgeon, and had taken more wine than usual. It was in the summer time, and the weather very hot and dry, which combined circumstances rendered us feverish and uncomfortable. It was late when we returned to our lodgings, and our sleeping room was small and ill ventilated. We went to bed, but not to sleep, and tossed and tumbled, changing our position every moment, but were too restless to repose; at length we turned towards the window and perceived between it and the bed there stood a short, thick-set, burly figure, with a huge head, staring at us in the face. Certainly nothing could appear more real and substantial, and after gazing on this monstrous creature, we put out our hand, when the monster opened his ponderous jaw and bit at us. We tried various experiments with the creature, such as putting our hand before his face, which seemed to cover part of it. The longer we contemplated it the more palpable was this figure, and the more wrathful were its features. Struck with the apparent reality of the apparition, we mechanically felt our pulse; it was throbbing at a fearful rate; our skin was hot and dry, and the temporal arteries were throbbing at a railway speed. The physical condition had produced the phantom. We then jumped out of bed, when the spectre seemed to be nearer, and of more gigantic proportions. We then threw open the window to admit a little air, sponged our head and body, and thus, by removing the cause, the monster disappeared.

This illustration, while only an evidence of temporary misconception, certainly shows how easy it may be for an impressionable man or woman to declare that he has actually seen an actual person: and the chances for deception are so numerous that the truth seeker will always eradicate the possible physical and mental causes even before he proceeds to question the authenticity of the particular story.

A great many years ago, a clever observer, Dr. Forbes Winslow, tabulated the conditions which might lead to the successful "raising" of ghosts or spirits, and these are so concisely put that I present them:

GHOSTS OF THE MIND'S EYE OR PHANTASMA.

Illusive perception, or ocular spectra; conversion of natural objects into phantoms.

Illusive conception, or spectral illusion; creation of phantoms.

GHOSTS OF THE EYE, OR OPTICAL ILLUSION.

Atmospheric: Refraction, reflection.

Gases.

Lenses and mirrors.

Diseases of the eye.

The conductive temperamental and emotional conditions may be "credulity, enthusiasm, superstition, timidity, imagination, poetic frenzy, sympathy, exalted joy, deep love, nature, protracted anxiety, delirium of fever, alcohol or narcotics; exhaustion, diseases of the brain."

There is no more unpleasant task than that of gravely listening to the earnest story of some personal friend who details with all sincerity some apparently incontrovertible story of spiritualism, which he finishes with a triumphant "Now, what can you say to that?" I am usually reminded of the schoolboy's riddle which implies an answer affecting the veracity of the lad in question. There is always some "perfectly honest person," or some individual "of undoubted standing in the community" who has actually had the experience; and doubt means skepticism that nearly always hurts the feelings of the narrator.

The latitude for errors in human testimony is very great, and there have been so many wonderful happenings which were for a long time inexplicable, but were finally cleared up, that, all things being equal, most of the stories of the spiritualists are based upon guess-work, coincidence, or are based upon unjustifiable assumption.

An example of how easily a delusion may affect a number of people at once—a simple illusion being the starting point—is the following: A large crowd of people gathered in front of St. Paul's church, in London, and were gazing intently upward at the statue of a saint, who was apparently nodding at them. The greatest excitement existed until a sparrow-hawk that had perched upon the ringlets of the figure flew away, when the illusion was explained. It can be easily imagined how some excitable person not waiting for the denouement might have told his own story and readily deceived many gullible persons. The records of the investigations of the Society for Psychical Research, and the older English trials, as well as the French Causes Celebres, are full of startling illustrations of the unreliability of human testimony; and in these days of scientific precision and materialism, it is much easier to prick the popular delusion than it was in a more sentimental age. Even the matter of circumstantial evidence has nearly had its death-blow.

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Mens' All Wool Cheviot Suits, $7.25; worth $12.50.
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Notice of Incorporation.

The Omaha Oil and Mining Company was organized as a corporation under the laws of Nebraska, and commenced business as such on the Sixth day of March, 1888, under the name and style of the Omaha Oil and Mining Company. Its existence will terminate on the first Tuesday of March 1950. The general nature of the business to be transacted by said corporation shall be the locating, buying and selling of mineral claims, oil lands and lands containing other valuable deposits in the territory of Wyoming; the developing and working of said mining claims, oil lands and lands containing other valuable deposits; and the dealing in oil and other valuable deposits, and such other business as is incident thereto. The principle place of transacting its business shall be in the city of Omaha and its affairs shall be conducted by a board of trustees, consisting of nine members who shall elect a President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer. Its capital stock shall be $500,000 to be paid in as called for by the board of trustees, and the highest amount of indebtedness or liability to which the corporation is at any time to subject itself, is $25,000.

J. P. MAILENDER,
F. HAARMANN,
C. J. SCHMIDT,
A. BURMESTER,
CHAS. WEHRER,
EDWARD AINSCOW,
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