

HARVEST AND LABORERS IN THE PSYCHICAL FIELD.

BY FREDERIC W. H. MYERS.

THERE is no living savant, one may say with little fear of contradiction, who surpasses Mr. A. R. Wallace in generous readiness to esteem at its full worth the work of other men. And one may add that this habit of mind, so attractive in a man of acknowledged eminence, is as a rule not attractive only, but actively serviceable to science; that it stimulates effort, and creates an atmosphere in which good work is zealously done.

Yet there may be cases in which this ready appreciativeness may prove a hindrance to progress rather than a help. If wrongly received, it may lead men who have done little to think that they have done much; it may deter others from embarking on needful tasks which they may suppose to have been already amply performed.

In two papers in *THE ARENA* for January and February, 1891, Mr. Wallace dwelt, partly with criticism, and partly with praise, on the work already done by the Society for Psychical Research. To his criticisms I make no demur; they are legitimate and interesting; and indeed where Mr. Wallace's opinions diverge from those which I have myself set forth, I am disposed to think that we are but looking on "the two sides of the shield," — a shield embossed on either side with devices so marvellous that no man's interpretation can as yet suffice to unriddle them.

But on the other hand, I cannot let pass without protest the sentence (*ARENA*, January, p. 130) in which Mr. Wallace speaks of the thanks due to the Society for Psychical Research, "for having presented the evidence in such a way that the facts to be interpreted are now generally accepted as facts by all who have taken any trouble to inquire into the amount and character of the testimony for them, — the

opinion of those who have not taken that trouble being altogether worthless." Now in the first place I do not think that all those who have studied our testimony are convinced by it. I received a letter (for instance) not long ago, from a distinguished American, an old friend of mine, who wrote in the most cordial terms to say that out of personal regard for me he had read "Phantasms of the Living" from beginning to end, and that he did not believe a word of it. Our readers' scepticism is perhaps seldom quite so robust; but nevertheless I should say that the attitude of at least half of them is best described by saying not that they accept our evidence *ex animo*, but that they have not yet exactly managed to see their way to upsetting it.

Nor can I possibly treat as unimportant the attitude of that great majority of *savants* who have paid no attention at all to the matter. Naturally, their opinion of our evidence does not affect my own opinion thereof, but it decidedly affects my view as to what lines our work ought to follow. Why is it that these men have not studied our *Proceedings*? It will not do to talk about indolence and prejudice. All men are more or less indolent and prejudiced; but *savants* as a class are certainly less indolent, and probably less prejudiced, than any other class that one could name. We must not count upon finding our *savant* "*semper vacuum, semper amabilem*," any more than Horace found his young ladies always in that condition of affable receptivity. The main reason why so many eminent men neglect our work may be stated in a much less offensive way. The minds of all of us move in certain orbits, from which we are sensibly deflected only by the approach of some new body of adequate mass. Now our "psychical" experiments and observations have plainly not as yet attained sufficient mass to be able to deflect the majority of those great bodies, the luminaries of science, from their accustomed paths through the heavens. *Tides*, indeed, we do create; there is a reflux washing to and fro of magazine articles about our topic; but we have not yet generated that wholesale perturbation of the scientific system which our facts, if facts they be, must in time inevitably effect.

"Some of the best workers in the Society," says Mr. Wallace again, "still urge that the evidence is very deficient, both in amount and in quality, and that much more must be

obtained before it can be treated as really conclusive. This view, however," he adds, "appears to me to be an altogether erroneous one." On the contrary, I venture to say, this assertion of the need of more work, and consequently of more workers, is of absolutely primary, absolutely urgent importance. What would have become of the evolution theory itself (if I may use an *argumentum ad hominem* of no disrespectful kind), what would have become of that theory itself, though urged at first by *savants* of such surpassing merit, had no one been able to repeat and confirm their observations? And we who are dealing, not with plants and animals which can be held fast and observed, but, for the most part at any rate, with phantasmal sights, subjective impressions, — surely we must feel a tenfold need of the multiplication of centres of experiment and observation, of the formation of fresh bodies of record in every country, and in each year that passes by. No single small group can ever gain leverage enough to divert the world's prevalent modes of thought, unless it is gradually reinforced by fellow-workers enough to make the possible mistakes or possible death of a few persons quite unimportant to the general result.

It has been suggested by Mr. Wallace and by other critics that we have been too exclusively preoccupied with the idea of *telepathy*, that we have tried to force into that category phenomena which need a different or a further explanation. Considering the complexity of these phenomena there may well be some truth in this criticism, yet we should surely be unwise if we relaxed our insistence on the importance of *telepathy*, or the transference of thought or feeling from mind to mind without the agency of the recognized organs of sense as the very root and basis both of experiment and of theory as concerning an unseen world. No one, of course, can suppose that the infinitely complex laws of which we are just now obtaining a precursory glimpse and first faint intimation, can possibly be summarized in any single expression. But the prime importance of *telepathy* lies in the fact that here, at last, is an action of unseen, uncomprehended forces which can be made the subject of actual experiment. Nay, more, the very fact that in this special direction experiment turns out to be possible, is in itself an augury that we are on a true scientific track; for it involves a remarkable coincidence between a theoretical conclusion and a practical discovery.

In the first place, let us try to realize theoretically what is involved in the supposition that any sort of invisible intelligence can become in any way known to us. I speak of the methods of communication only, without reference to the nature of the supposed intelligence, beyond the mere fact of its habitual invisibility. It is plain, I think, that the said intelligence must either so act upon visible matter as to affect our sense-organs in the ordinary way, or else must convey messages to our minds by some directer process, not depending on the intervention of our organs of sense.

Now probably no one will assume that the first method will alone be employed. Even those who insist, with Mr. Wallace, on the objectivity of apparitions, do not, I think, maintain that it is *only* by moving material objects that unseen intelligences affect our minds. Few will doubt that *if* there be communication from unseen beings at all, it will probably be at least partly in the second of the two modes already specified, that is, that it will reach our minds in some way more intimate and direct than by ordinary sense-perception. But if this be so, then there must be in our minds a certain power of reciprocity. We must be able to receive the message in the same impalpable way in which the unseen intelligence communicates it.

But if we suppose that man possesses this power of receiving direct or telepathic messages from unembodied or invisible intelligences, it is natural to inquire whether he is capable of receiving similar messages from embodied or visible intelligences. If we cannot find that he is thus capable, our belief in the supposed messages from the unseen will be doubly difficult; for we shall have to postulate both the new forms of intelligence and the new mode of intercourse. But if, on the other hand, we can show that the mode of intercourse here needed does already exist, and appears in man's relations with his fellow-men, then the transition to messages from the unseen will be so much the less violent. We shall only be supposing that man can receive from the disembodied a kind of message which he already receives from the embodied, and which has no obvious dependence on a corporeal embodiment. One single proved transmission, direct from mind to mind, of the most trivial fact or percept, will do more to make communion with the unseen *scientifically* conceivable,—I do not say more to make

it *morally* conceivable, — than all the poetry and all the rhetoric which has ever stirred the hearts of men.

Such, on the one side, is my deductive argument from the very conception of communication with unseen intelligences.

And do we, on the other hand, find, by empirical observation of the phenomena around us, anything which indicates the existence of a supernormal perceptivity such as theory would suggest? It is known to readers of the Society for Psychical Research *Proceedings* that we do find such indications, scattered at first, and appearing unsought-for amid the phenomena of mesmeric or somnambulic states; but now to some slight extent isolated into distinctness, and brought under experimental control.

To some slight extent only, I repeat; for the experiments thus far made, although completely convincing to those who, like myself, have witnessed many of them, under very varied conditions, have nevertheless not yet passed into that desired stage at which one may be able to repeat them before any observer, at any moment. At present they are proved by the same kind of evidence as certain rare pathological phenomena (I do not of course mean that telepathy is itself in any way a morbid product)—phenomena such as those surprising rises and falls of the human temperature which are unpredictable, sporadic, and transitory, and must rest for their evidence on the good faith and accuracy of comparatively few observers.

Yet these telepathic experiments have a very hopeful side. Experience has already shown that the phenomena may be developed at any moment, between quite normal persons, and with no bad effects of any sort whatever. Only we cannot tell except by actual trial, and trial of a patient and careful kind, between *which* persons, out of all mankind, these telepathic messages can be made to run.

What we desire, then, what we ask of all who sympathize with our efforts, is neither premature praise nor equally premature theorizing, but active co-operation in our endeavor to improve and extend our experiments in thought-transference. We want to get our telepathic transmissions distant, definite, and reproducible.

It is desirable to get them *at long distances*, — not because it is really more marvellous that thought should thus travel a million miles than that it should travel a millimetre, —

but for the merely practical reason that at long distances it is easy to avoid two main sources of error, namely, *hyperæsthesia*, which may be quite unconscious, and *fraudulent codes*, which may be hard to detect. Most, nay, probably all, of the so-called experiments in thought-transference which have been offered by "thought-readers," etc., from the public platform, have really had nothing at all to do with thought-transference, have depended either on abnormal delicacy of tactile and other sensory perception, or on the adroit use of preconcerted signals. It is only when the observer has complete control of the conditions (which he never has in any public exhibition), that it is worth while to conduct experiments between two persons in the same room.

And even in cases where the good faith—the *conscious* good faith—of everyone concerned is above suspicion, it must be remembered that there are both unconscious actions and unconscious perceptions which may wholly vitiate an experiment. The rule should be so to arrange the experiment that the percipient *cannot* profit by unconscious indications; that he cannot (for example) see the expression of the agent's face, or hear the sound of his pencil as he writes down a number to be guessed. Such precautions should be a matter of course; and when they are taken, these experiments near at hand are certainly the easiest and best for private experimenters to begin with, although the desirability of gradually increasing the distance between the persons concerned should always be kept in view.

Let A and P begin their trial, then, in quiet and calm of mind; let A, the agent, sit behind P, the percipient, and not in contact. Let A be provided with a full pack of cards, in which he replaces the card drawn, after each trial, or with a bag of known numbers—say from ten to one hundred—a range convenient for computation—in which bag he replaces and shuffles up the number drawn, after each trial. Let him draw a card (to take cards as our example) say, "Now!" and gaze fixedly at it. Let P keep his mind as blank as possible, and make his guess only when some kind of image of color, suit, or pips, in some way floats into his mind. His first guess only must be counted, and must be received in silence. Let A continue this process for some prearranged number of times, say ten times, and record accurately all the experi-

ments made. Let him renew the process, with intervals of hours or days between each batch of trials, until he has some hundreds of results to analyze. Then let him send his results, with description of the conditions under which the trials were made, to Dr. Richard Hodgson, 5 Boylston Place, Boston, Mass. Dr. Hodgson will tell him if it is worth his while to go on, and will advise as to modifications in the form of experiment.

These hints must here suffice as to experiments made close at hand. But experiment, or observation verging into experiment, is often possible at long distances as well. It often happens that some one tells me that he (or she) has so peculiar a sympathy with some given friend that what one of the pair is actually feeling or thinking at a distance is reproduced by the sensation or thought of the other. To such communications my invariable reply is, "Keep a 'psychical' diary. Put down therein at once every incident which you intend to count, if it turns out (so to say) a telepathic success, and no incident which you do *not* intend to count. Let your friend keep a similar diary, without showing it to you; after a few months let me compare the two diaries with one another."

I am not armed with supernatural, or even with statutory powers; and my informants have for the most part thought that they had obliged me quite enough if they *promised* to do as I told them. But just as I was beginning to imitate the dictum, "Miracles do not happen," with the dictum, "Psychical diaries are not kept," the lady termed Miss X—, in Proceedings XIV. and XVI., came to furnish an exception to my rule. I shall not attempt to summarize the "Record of Telepathic and Other Experiences" in Proceedings XVI.; but I trust that it may be the prototype of many similar records, which can be kept the more easily now that this example has been set.

I will give in brief, one American example (to be found at length in S. P. R. Proceedings XVIII.) of well-recorded telepathic transmission. The incident thus transferred is trivial and even ludicrous; the fact of the transference was absolutely useless. But the case is not only none the worse for this; it is all the better. When we are trying to prove that such transmission exists, we want to keep clear, if we can, of emotional complications. If P is brooding over A's

approaching death, and sees a figure of A, then, even if the hour coincides, we cannot help a suspicion that the brooding may have produced the figure. But few, I think, will explain the following incident as a mere outcome of morbid sentimentality. We owe it to the kindness of Dr. Elliott Coues, who knows both ladies concerned, and happened to call on Mrs. C—— the very day on which that lady received the following letter from her friend, Mrs. B——.

Monday Evening, January 14, 1889.

MY DEAR FRIEND, — I know you will be surprised to receive a note from me so soon, but not more so than I was to-day, when you were shown to me clairvoyantly, in a somewhat embarrassed position. I doubt very much if there was any truth in it; nevertheless, will relate it, and leave you to laugh at the idea of it.

I was sitting in my room sewing, this afternoon, about two o'clock, when what should I see but your own dear self; but, heavens! in what a position. Now, I don't want to excite your curiosity too much, or try your patience too long, so will come to the point at once. You were falling up the front steps in the yard. You had on your black skirt and velvet waist, your little straw bonnet, and in your hand were some papers. When you fell, your hat went in one direction and the papers in another. You got up very quickly, put on your bonnet, picked up the papers, and lost no time getting into the house. You did not appear to be hurt, but looked somewhat mortified. It was all so plain to me that I had ten to one notions to dress myself and come over and see if it were true, but finally concluded that a sober, industrious woman like yourself would not be stumbling around at that rate, and thought I'd best not go on a wild goose chase. Now, what do you think of such a vision as that? Is there any possible truth in it? I feel almost ready to scream with laughter whenever I think of it; you did look *too* funny, spreading yourself out in the front yard. "Great was the fall thereof."

This letter came to us in an envelope addressed: Mrs. E. A. C——, 217 Del. Ave., N. E., Washington, D. C., and with the postmarks, Washington, D. C., Jan. 15, 7 A. M., 1889, and Washington, N. E. C. S., Jan. 15, 8 A. M. Some further letters in the postmarks are illegible.

Now the point is that every detail in this telepathic vision was correct. Mrs. C—— had actually (as she tells me in a letter dated March 7, 1889) fallen in this way, at this place, in the dress described, at 2.41, on January 14. The

coincidence can hardly have been due to chance. If we suppose that the vision preceded the accident, we shall have an additional marvel, which, however, I do not think that we need here face. "About 2," in a letter of this kind, may quite conceivably have meant 2.41.

The *definiteness* of the details here reproduced, is all, I think, that we can reasonably desire. But most important, and I fear, most difficult to obtain, of all the qualities of our ideal telepathic experiment, is that of *reproducibility*. This is, I think, a difficulty which inheres in the very nature of the phenomenon itself. We are mainly concerned here with the powers not of the waking or empirical, but of the submerged or unconscious self. The transference of the telepathic message, though it may be helped by conscious concentration, takes place (as I hold) mainly in strata of our being which lie below the threshold of ordinary consciousness. It seems as though the influence of the *percipient's* conscious self, at any rate, were merely hurtful to the experiment, so that to get the percipient at his best we have to catch him in a state of original innocence which he cannot long maintain. It too often has happened that so soon as his own curiosity was roused, so soon as he began to speculate on the process which was going on, and to wonder how he caught the impression, so soon did the impression cease to travel, and his unconscious self could send its message upwards no more.

I am disposed to think that for the present it is to hypnotism that we must look for cases where the telepathic message can be sent repeatedly and at will. It is in the rare cases of *sommeil à distance*, or such cases as those of Mrs. Pinhey, Dr. Héricourt, and Dr. Gley, reported in Vol. II. of *Phantasms of the Living*, that there has as yet been the nearest approach to that clock-work regularity and repeatability which is the experimental ideal. It is, therefore, on the medical profession that I would urge the importance of watching for cases of this sort, which are likely to be found more frequently as the therapeutic use of hypnotism extends.

I have mentioned several different forms in which these telepathic messages may be observed by careful seekers. I certainly do not assert that the power or agency operative in each of these cases is precisely the same. On the contrary, I think it probable that there are varieties and complexities

quite beyond our present speculation. But at least these cases fall for us under the same primary or obvious category; they are all cases where a thought, a feeling, an impulse, a picture, has been transferred from one mind to another without the agency of the recognized organs of sense.

There are some, both among friends and among opponents, who are inclined to represent telepathic experiment as a petty thing. "What does it come to," say the opponents, "even though you do get a few silly thoughts or meaningless numbers out of one head into another?" "Enough of telepathy!" say the friends; "go on to something of vaster scope!"

These friends and these opponents are not those who have best realized the import of the telepathic claim. The true, the scientific opposition is of a quite different type. It asserts, not that the alleged discovery is a trifle which may be admitted with a sneer, but that it involves a new departure in science greater than its advocates can probably conceive, or have as yet come near to justify. Brushing aside all our further extensions of theory, they take their stand simply and decidedly against telepathy itself; and wisely so, for if telepathy be once admitted, there is, as seems to me, no logical halting-place until we reach a far-off point which I will not confuse my present argument by attempting to specify.

And over all this far-stretching field there is a harvest of experiment, a harvest of observation, which only needs laborers to cut and carry, to thresh and winnow it. The reality, the extent, the importance of the phenomena which lie around us, unnoted and unexplained, are more fully recognized as each year's work adds at once to our knowledge and to our corresponding consciousness of ignorance. Such recognition, I say, is beginning to spread; but it has thus far brought with it all too little of active co-operation in the work of inquiry, that work which in America Dr. Hodgson, backed by Prof. W. James and Prof. W. S. Langley, pushes forward at once with caution and with energy. Those who wish our work to succeed must in some way help towards its success. No enterprise, I think, could promise more fairly. But we are still at the beginning of that great work and the end is far.