

MODERN SPIRITUALISM.

We have received from a faithful and highly respected minister of our brotherhood, far advanced in years, the following communication upon a topic we have hardly felt prepared to discuss in these pages, which he urges with a strong conviction of his own and our duty regarding it. He prefaces this appeal with a long and very interesting narrative of the way by which he was brought to his present position,—which, as he thinks, has not hindered, but greatly helped him in the modest labors of his comparatively obscure ministry,—and he has greatly at heart the obligation of delivering his testimony. From his narrative it appears that between thirty-five and forty years ago he was led, by experience of bitter personal bereavement, to open his mind to the claims put forth by modern Spiritualism to establish and verify personal and living communication with the world of departed spirits. With the truth or error of those claims we have nothing here to do, controversially. Our friend's testimony corresponds with our own and (we have no doubt) a very common experience, as to an interest in this matter, coming very close to the full acceptance of those claims, in some who stand among the highest in our general respect. That they have been enormously discredited by charlatany of all degrees—such as that which the "Seybert Commission" did good service by exposing—neither he nor we can doubt. Our business with the subject here is simply as a form of experience honestly told, closely associated with the religious life in those who share it, and, with multitudes said to count by millions, making the main avenue of their religious thought or hope. It would be brutal merely to turn a deaf ear and a cold shoulder to any human appeal; and we are glad to give our brother the opportunity to state his case in his own words.

It will be seen from my narrative that I have made no special claim to scientific thoroughness in my personal investigations. A faithful use of my own common-sense faculties, sharpened somewhat by the experiences of my early business life, was the main reliance. I had already outgrown my former irreligious skepticism, and had now a Christian faith in immortality, and also an entire belief in the near presence and silent agency of departed spirits. And such I suppose to be the

faith of most of those to whom my present words may come. With such,—especially those with largely developed intuition,—why need this new claim be so strange and difficult of belief? It is but a single step, as it were, to be taken. For, if it be true that our disembodied friends in the other life are permitted to be helpfully near us, especially in times of trouble, is it so very strange, in this age of wonderful inventions, that something like a telegraphic method should have been discovered, through which the unseen ones might be able to transmit intelligible messages to us? And why should it be thought wise in us to be so *very* unbelieving,—so much like the doubting Thomas of old,—when our thoughts are turned towards this claim? I plead not for credulity, but only for a reasonable degree of openness to a reception of truths from the unseen and spiritual as well as from the seen and temporal life. In such a fair state of mind, it is not so difficult for those who earnestly seek to know the truth of this matter to find it. Thus it seems to me now, though, when first looking in this direction, I myself was exceeding captious and unfair in my expectations. There have been multitudes of open and intelligent minds and yearning hearts, in all parts of the civilized world, who within the last forty years have thus found a most cheerful and helpful faith; and this so-called Spiritualism is still spreading with unprecedented rapidity.

But there is another class of minds over which Spiritualism has a still more remarkable power, though in a somewhat different way from the other. It is probable that more of the so-called infidels and materialists have been converted by this means within forty years than has been done through all other instrumentalities during the entire century. But those who are firmly held within the grasp of material science, with no knowledge or belief of anything beyond, have to go through a different and more complicated process of thought and experience before their eyes can be opened to spiritual realities. And the needed helps in this direction are by no means wanting, for the power from above is of abundant force to meet the demands of all classes. But to well-trained scientific minds elaborate scientific methods seem to be essential; and such have been going on, with more or less thoroughness, from the earliest stages of the movement. With such investigators, the work naturally arranges itself into a threefold shape. They must first be made to know that there is a spiritual as well as a material universe, whose laws are closely interblended with our earthly conditions. They must know, also, that human beings rightly belong to *both* these conditions, and that the being translated from one to the other by the event called "death" does not annihilate the means of a mutual knowledge of each other's condition and wants, and the possibilities of social intercourse between them.

Of the more thorough investigations of the phenomena of Spiritualism—mainly of a scientific character—the most elaborate and successful have been in England and Germany, though much of this kind of effort

has been made in this country, particularly in the earlier stages of the movement. And of the general results of such investigations into the physical phenomena I may say, in the language of the eminent scientist, Alfred Russel Wallace: "They have been tested and examined by skeptics of every grade of incredulity, men in every way qualified to detect imposture or to discover natural causes,—trained physicists, medical men, lawyers, and men of business,—but in every case the investigators have either retired, baffled, or become converts. . . . No earnest and patient inquirer has ever come to a conclusion adverse to the reality of the phenomena, and no Spiritualist has ever yet given them up as false." And of the spiritual theory he says: "It is the logical outcome of the whole of the facts [*i.e.*, that the so-called dead are alive, and thus manifest themselves]. Those who deny it, in every case with which I am acquainted, leave half the facts out of view."

I cannot, of course, with my present limited opportunity, give a specified account of these investigations. But, in a note at the close, I will try to give some references that will put the sincere and earnest inquirer in the way of finding out for himself the true state of the case as regards the extent of this movement and the actual weight of proofs upon which it rests. I now mean more particularly the results of the thoroughly honest and largely scientific investigations referred to above.

There has been, also, not only an abundance of fraudulent imitations of these phenomena, but likewise certain pretentious but extremely superficial attempts at actual investigation, by persons of adequate ability, if only their inclination had been equal to their ability. The most marked case of this description—in the more recent days at least—has been that of the "Seybert Commission" of the University of Pennsylvania. Some three years ago, a commissioners' report was issued from that quarter, confessedly of a preliminary and fragmentary character, but with the promise of a more full and satisfactory report to be given in due time. That additional report still lingers, and it is doubtful whether anything further will ever be heard of it. The "preliminary" report has been repeatedly and thoroughly reviewed by Spiritualists, among whom it is generally thought to be simply an ingenious illustration of the "How not to do it" of Dickens, the real object being to secure to the university the \$60,000 bequeathed by an honest Spiritualist, in the full faith that the result would be an honest and faithful examination into the claims of Spiritualism. Let those who have read the one-sided "preliminary" report read also such a review of it as was written by Professor Henry Kiddle,—formerly superintendent of the New York public schools, but now president of the American Spiritualist Alliance,—and then decide as to the merits of the case.

There is now with me an almost irresistible temptation greatly to extend my proofs of the wonderful growth of this new faith, but I must refrain after a few more sentences of a brief and fragmentary character. I hold in my hand a slip from the public press, in which it is said of a

second session of a world's Spiritualist congress which was held simultaneously with the great Exposition: "It was in session from the 9th to the 16th of September, being composed of all Spiritist and Spiritualist schools without distinction. Twenty millions adherents of all countries and seventy-five journals and reviews were represented." I have also before me a list of more than one hundred names of eminent persons in almost every public position, even up to some of the European crowned heads, who are known to be more or less decisively interested in Spiritualism. And within the limits of my own observation and knowledge — more particularly within our own Unitarian body — I might make out quite an extended list of prominent ones who are at least almost persuaded to be Spiritualists, and some of whom are not less decisively so than myself; but for reasons of their own they do not seem willing to confess it to the general public.

I think it would astonish some of our theological thinkers, could they see, even as clearly as I have done, the power exercised by this faith in the recent overturn of old religious dogmas and errors. To me it has been satisfactorily demonstrated that this has hardly been second to any other cause of the great theological revolution. There is also a power in this faith, not only to interest the minds, but also to touch the deep places of the human heart, and to move all in the direction of noble action, not otherwise often felt by the great body of humanity. It has the marked peculiarity of being especially fitted to meet the wants of all conditions of life. For even with the very lowest there are unseen helpers at work, who, though not fitted for a higher kind of work, are yet just in the condition to take hold of and give a starting-point of progress to the most abandoned. And to those already in the higher stages of progress there are angelic helpers ever ready at hand to more and more purify, brighten, and lift up the most advanced of earth's children. It is true that the movement is still in a chaotic and often repellent condition, yet it has surely within it an intrinsic capacity to arouse and lift up, which is not felt by those under the exclusive control of any of the popular religions of the day. I have seen many striking proofs of this, not only among the lower but also the higher and more cultivated classes. Let me give an illustration of the degree of interest this subject has already awakened even among our quiet and thoughtful Unitarians.

The recent visit to this country for lecturing and other purposes of the distinguished scientist, Alfred Russel Wallace, will be well remembered, especially by those who attended his Lowell Institute course of lectures. Some fifteen years before, he had faithfully examined the claims of modern Spiritualism, had become a decided and outspoken believer, and had published largely of the results in England. Being, however, still deeply engaged with Darwin in a specialty of material science, he did not for some years give so much prominence to the other as at first, so that he was not probably generally known here as a positive

believer in Spiritualism. But before leaving the country, while at San Francisco, he was induced to give a single lecture upon this subject, in which he gave a condensed statement of some of the more interesting of his former experiences, and reiterated his decided belief in the genuineness and high significance of the new faith. This lecture was published in a cheap form for general circulation. Availing myself of this state of things, and of the kindly courtesy of the editor of the *Christian Register*, I made public the facts of the case, and offered to mail the lecture free to all who should send the address and postage. The result was that over four hundred copies were thus applied for and sent out, probably among the more thoughtful and spiritual-minded of the readers of the *Register*.

The letters received were mostly brief business responses to my published offer; but in quite a number something more was indicated, generally a yearning desire both of mind and heart for more light upon the subject of immortality. I give a few detached passages from these to indicate a leading tendency among this class of persons: —

“It will be a great help to the cause of religion if men who are familiar with the facts of science can make them witnesses of an unseen world.”—“If not too craving, please send two copies of the lecture; and I will give one to our minister, who is a believer in its truths.”—“You will not wonder at my interest in it when I tell you I am eighty-seven years old, which in all probability is very near to the subject of the lecture.”—“I am not a Spiritualist, but am convinced of the truth of many of the phenomena, and believe the great discoveries of the future lie probably in that direction.”—“Can you spare two more copies of *If a Man die, shall he live Again?* The one you just sent we have had to part with to a friend who is seeking the truth.”—“Will you please send me a copy of Professor Wallace’s lecture, as I feel that any new views of the future life will be most welcome.”—“I am a student of the theological school at ——. I have been an investigator of Spiritualism for eight years, and its philosophy is deeply rooted in my soul. . . . I feel that Professor Wallace must have offered some interesting thoughts upon this grand subject. Please send me a copy; and, if you can spare half a dozen, they will be welcomed by my fellow-students.”

The following is from the recently bereaved companion of a well-known professor of geological science, but whose closing days were devoted to the Unitarian ministry: “My husband had been for many years in accord with Mr. Wallace’s search for light on the future of our being; and we may believe it did not impair his value as a scientific man. In the hours of waiting, when disease had done its worst on his frame, all was peace and calmness and firmness. We did not talk of dying, but of living. In a recent discourse he had said: ‘Science has pushed out her boundaries on the borderland between the seen and the unseen. The mind is brought now by science into relations with realms of matter which lie as far beyond sense as that which we have called spirit.’”

He alludes to Professor Crookes's discovery of a form of matter which is imponderable." But this will be enough to answer the purpose in view. The extracts will afford a slight glimpse of the depth of thought and feeling in this direction among a very large class of the noblest of our humanity.

I have now in mind as my closing effort a point of special interest which I wish to press home upon the conscientious thought of our Unitarian denomination, especially of its ministers. It is certain that there is a marked and very widely extended movement now going on in the religious world, which cannot but have a weighty influence for good or for evil upon the welfare of our humanity. How should we, as Liberal Christians, regard and treat this far-reaching tide of human thought and feeling? Should we treat it contemptuously, as utterly unworthy of serious notice, or even coolly ignore its existence when we are seeking the means of increasing our power to help religiously those under our more immediate influence? I am not mistaken, I think, when I assert that what these queries indicate is indeed the general course followed by the leading ones of the denomination. Seldom, if ever, is there a respectful reference made to Spiritualism in any public discourse or publication of our people, so that, were future history wholly dependent upon Unitarian chronicles, it would hardly be known that, in this age of wonderful progress, vast multitudes, outnumbering by more than tenfold the entire mass of denominational Unitarians, are confidently holding positive proofs of a life to come, instead of being confined to the simple hope of such a consummation. In all the tracts of the American Unitarian Association bearing upon this subject, not one, I think, ever distinctly refers to our modern proofs of immortality; and in all our pulpits, ministerial gatherings, and conferences, seldom is there even a mention of the existence and character of a movement so extended, and in reality directly in the line of what should be the work of a truly liberal Christianity, as is Spiritualism, and which is moving the minds and hearts of humanity as Unitarianism, with all its excellences, has never yet done. For it is a manifest fact that our influence is sadly wanting — at least, in its external manifestations — in the power of a certain spiritual enthusiasm which should belong to a living Christian faith. From my point of observation, it is equally manifest that an absolute proof of the reality and nearness of an unseen life and its active interest in earthly affairs is what is absolutely needed to change our now too purely ethical sanctions and methods into a living power which would make us enthusiastic helpers, not only of the intellectual and educated, but also of the common people, who would thus be made once more to hear the truth gladly.

It is true that the sanctions of a world to come are now used by our religious teachers, but often so faintly, and sometimes so doubtfully, that a cloudy shadow of agnosticism is plainly to be discerned by the many who are ever yearning to *know*, if a man die, he shall live again.

And no less is an actual knowledge of a hereafter needful to such semi-agnostic preachers, to give the force of enthusiasm to their pulpit utterances. True, a man ought not to preach what he does not believe; but he can surely notice with candid courtesy the belief of Spiritualists—some of whom are to be found in all the churches—until he shall have made all reasonable haste to know if it be not an important truth they hold. The preacher who will do this will find, even though he should not be able fully to accept the leading claim of Spiritualism, that much interesting thought has thus been brought to light,—or at least greatly brightened,—thought that may do much to aid him in his Christian work. Some of these may, it is true, be clearly recognized as but a reiteration of revealments made through the somewhat imperfect seership of Swedenborg, whose work was a noble one and well accomplished, considering the age in which he lived and the theological shackles still clinging to him, greatly impairing the clearness of his spiritual vision. But since his day there has been a growth in seership as well as in general religious ideas, though no finality has yet been reached in either. It has, however, become certain to the well-informed Spiritualist of to-day that there are no permanent “hells” in the spirit world, though there is a hell in every soul darkened by inveterate evil, which, when carried to the world beyond, illustrates a righteous law of retribution in a manner the very thought of which, even while here in the body, is fitted to suggest images more terrible than the flames of material fire. But with us is the firm assurance that in the end, though it may be ages hence, these mental fires will consume the dross, and brighten into eternal joy the life of every human being, all being eventually destined to a career of eternal progress. And on other points of religious faith there has also been a clarifying and brightening through the light now shining upon our world, which promises well for the future.

It is true that this influx of light and love from the upper heavens is no new thing in our earth's history; but the great gain now is a *positive knowledge* of the fact, thus securing to the thoughtful and aspiring an ever-present consciousness of angelic sympathy and aid. And with this comes an intensified intuition, and the firm assurance of direct inspiration from unseen sources, higher or lower, as may be the growth and aspiration of the individual soul. It is to ends like these that all the present varied phases of mediumship should tend, the ultimate result of all being the enlightenment and elevation of personal character; and through such agencies, whether in the earthly or heavenly conditions, is the Divine Kingdom to be finally established.*

H. S.

*There are, I suppose, more than a dozen periodicals published in this country devoted more or less exclusively to Spiritualism; and an almost innumerable mass of books and pamphlets is already before the public. But all these (and indeed everything relating to the movement) need to be well sifted, in order that the solid wheat may be reached. But the effort will be well repaid in the end. I will now

One word as to the Report of the *Seybert Commission*, which we noticed pretty fully in this *Review* at the time of its appearing.* It seems to us a mistake in our friends to spend their time in any efforts to impeach the value of that Report for what alone it claims to be,—still more, to impeach the motive of its authors. "It would be a mere matter of opinion," they say, to declare fraudulent all matters of the class they deal with: they report only on a brief, limited, and special group of investigations. Our friends should content themselves with the difficulty of proving a universal negative: they are the last to deny that trickery and delusion in this matter have been both gross and frequent; and their business is not to fight outright the prejudice thus begotten, especially by assailing the good faith of known and trusted men, but to live it down by joining honestly in the exposure and suppression of those worst foes which are of their own household.

Concerning the subject itself of our friend's communication we have these two things to say. First, that the weight of educated opinion still regards the phenomena in question as merely *human* phenomena, belonging to the obscure border land of physiology and psychology, which only the most accomplished observers have any competency to investigate. Even if it were not so, however, the shrinking of a healthy mind from entering into that obscure realm is not diminished, but rather increased. The warning, as of a thing forbidden or at least *uncanny*, comes from all sources. The Catholic says, frankly, Yes, the spirits are real, but they are devils, even if they come to us disguised as angels of light. "The spirit that I have seen may be a devil," says Hamlet, "and the devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape." Spiritists themselves tell us that many of them are lost or degraded spirits, "hellians," whose influence means mischief and danger; and, once open to that sort of intercourse, a weak will becomes their easy victim. Physiologists translate this into the language of the natural sphere, by warning us that a person once "hypnotized," even to his own great benefit, in healing from some ner-

give the leading titles of a few pamphlets that may be of use to those who are just beginning to investigate the claims of Spiritualism, all of which may be had at a slight expense, either at the *Banner of Light* bookstore, Boston, or that of the *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, Chicago. In some of these pamphlets may be found something like a directory for further progress: a *Review of the Seybert Commission*, by Henry Kiddle; *Spiritualism at the Church Congress*, with advice for inquirers; *Home Circles, and how to investigate Spiritualism*; *Heaven Revised* (by a medium); Professor Wallace's lecture, *If a Man die, shall he live again?*; a *Discourse on Spiritualism*, by Rev. M. J. Savage; and one on the same subject by Hon. Sydney Dean, of Rhode Island.

* In August, 1887, see page 175.

vous malady, has thereafter a weak side, which may be taken advantage of to a wicked end,—as a tyro in crime, once yielding, will be dominated ever after by the fiercer and stronger will of his captain. There is perhaps no form of apparent good without its accompanying shadow of evil or danger; and those most comforting visions that have cheered so many souls in these latter days have left trailing after them their host of suspicious consequences. These things make many of us wary of coming too close to the scene of these visions—or too often, if we chance to have been beguiled once and again into exploring their enticing secret. That in great grief and despondency many have been led that way into the grateful faith which our friend has described we do not doubt, and we are the farthest possible from blaming them. But, after all, grief and despondency are morbid moods of the soul; and a mind of healthy vigor craves no such questionable support. Such a mind, under severe scientific training, is the only kind fit to investigate and pronounce upon those claims which we, who are not scientists ourselves, leave with entire contentment to those who are directing to that channel the efforts of the societies for psychical research.

In his lecture on this subject Professor Wallace makes a suggestion which is very interesting at any rate, and may prove to be of scientific value. The phenomena which we call “spiritism,” he says, have been very numerous in past ages, and down to a pretty recent time—when they seem to have ceased, under the influence of the scientific spirit, till somewhat suddenly revived within the last half-century. The reason, as he suggests, may be that they appeared throughout the Middle Age in well-remembered epidemics of sorcery and witchcraft, which two or three centuries ago led to a spasm of horror and dread, when they were mercilessly suppressed, and scores of thousands of “mediums” (as we should call them) were hanged, burned, or drowned. Hence, under those laws of heredity which he has himself done so much to explain, the whole thing was held in abeyance, till the prevalence of a more humane and skeptical spirit has lately permitted a fresh development of that peculiar nervous susceptibility. If there is anything in this theory, we seem to find the more reason why most of us (unless under some special and powerful constraint) should, as a general thing, most wisely leave the subject to the explanation of trained scientific specialists. We cannot afford the time, the risk to our own mental balance, or the waste

(as we regard it) of moral force, of following up that exploration ourselves.

Still further,—and this is our second point,—we may doubt whether this line of approach to matters of spiritual contemplation is either normal, or wholesome to the ordinary mind. The most important and the hardest religious problem of our day is to deliver religion from the spell of what is magical, technical, or remote, and make our conception of it purely ethical, near, personal. It does not appear that either dogma or vision is favorable to that result. Some of the wisest, gravest, and most devout of those we have ever known, to whom religious things were as real and near as to anybody, have by no means desired that direct vision of the future life as phenomenal and objective, in which others find such comfort. They prefer, for their own souls' good, that that realm should be left—as God and Nature seem to have left it—behind the veil of mystery, which they would feel it a sort of profanation to attempt to pierce. They distinctly accept the position, that the desirable condition to attain is not positive assurance of the fact, but a humble trust—which long experience may ripen into clear and glad assurance—that the Law of Life we live under is “holy, just, and good,” and that what that Law ordains—whether or not the survival of this keen, pleasing, anxious, burdened personal consciousness we so cling to now—is to be accepted reverently. It is, at all events, unalterable. And one who, in either event, does not trustfully accept the appointment of the Power that has fixed our destiny, has not, in their view, yet learned the alphabet of the true religious life. They deliberately choose this mood of mind before the importunate craving, or the jaunty assertions,* or even the triumphant certainty, which others press so eagerly. Certainly that solemn hope of the ages, slowly brightening in elect souls into an enrapturing vision, is perhaps the thing held dearest and most sacred in all the experiences of the religious life. And it is in fear of doing it dishonor, of taking (as it were) this kingdom of heaven by violence, that those of whom we speak shrink even from that clearer revelation, if it were possible, which more daring hands would thrust upon their gaze.

*“ I am sometimes tempted to answer as did an old clergyman I heard of when I was a boy. Some one asked him if he believed he should recognize his friends in another world. ‘I know them now, don't I?’ he asked. ‘Yes,’ was the reply. ‘Well,’ he added, ‘I don't believe I shall be any bigger fool there than I am now.’”—Sermon of M. J. Savage, *My Easter Faith*.