

Transcription, July 2015:

The Graphic (London) 11(279) (3 April 1875): 327a-327b (anon.).

[p. 327a]

‘Modern Spiritualism.’

We have before us three notable works on this subject—“The Phenomena of Spiritualism,” by W. Crookes, F.R.S. (J. Burns), “Miracles and Modern Spiritualism,” by A. Russel Wallace (J. Burns), and “Hints for the Evidences of Spiritualism,” by an anonymous writer (Trübner and Co.) The first book is mainly a reproduction of some old accounts of experiments made by Mr. Crookes with Mr. Home and other physical mediums, to which is added a reply to some criticisms of the *Quarterly Review*, Mr. Crookes affirming that it is a mistake to look upon him as a spiritualist, and pointing out that in his first published article he had declared that “in a subject which, perhaps, more than any other lends itself to trickery and deception, the precautions against fraud appear to have been in most cases totally insufficient,” and that he had confessed that “the reasoning of some spiritualists would almost seem to justify Faraday’s severe statement that many dogs have the faculty of coming to much more logical conclusions.” Mr. Crookes’ position appears to be simply that of an inquirer. He puts forward no theory, but simply tells us that under strict test conditions certain phenomena occur which he is unable to account for by the working of any force hitherto recognised. He has seen books and other articles moved about without any visible agency. Luminous hands unattached to any body have patted his cheek, pulled his coat, picked flowers to pieces, and played an accordion. A pencil has risen upon its point, and after it had three times tumbled over in its efforts to write something a friendly lath has slid along the table to its aid. The pencil propping itself against this has made another ineffectual attempt to make marks upon paper and then a message has been rapped out that “We have tried to do as you asked, but our power is exhausted.” These and many other wonderful things, including the appearance of phantom forms and faces have been witnessed by Mr. Crookes, but as he admits that even yet there is in his mind an antagonism between *reason* and the consciousness that his senses (corroborated by those of all who were present) are not lying witnesses, he will, perhaps, excuse us for saying that his book has not convinced us of the genuineness of the phenomena. Mr. Crookes’ experiments with Miss Cook and her “familiar,” Katie King, are recounted in an appendix. He has obtained “absolute proof” that Katie and Miss Cook are two separate material beings. They have both been seen together in full light, with the slight drawback, however, that the head of one of them was muffled in a shawl. Photographs have been taken of them separately, and one of the two together, but in this latter instance as Katie is “seated in front of Miss Cook’s head,” we should imagine it to be rather difficult to identify the portrait of the medium. Mr. Crookes has the greatest confidence in Miss Cook, who he believes “could not carry on deception even if she were to try” and it is therefore greatly to be regretted that latterly she has “become nervous in consequence of certain ill-advised suggestions that force should be employed as an adjunct to more scientific modes of research.” We learn from *The Spiritualist* that Mr. Crookes has very recently been experimenting with Mrs. Annie Eva Fay, whose performances as the “Indescribable Phenomenon” were brought to such an abrupt conclusion immediately after Messrs. Maskelyne and Cooke produced the same manifestations under still more perplexing conditions. It will be remembered that Mrs. Fay was tied with strips of linen. Mr. Crookes tied her with a current of electricity, the wires which she held being connected with a galvanometer, which he declares would infallibly tell tales if she left go of the handles. It appears, however, that some one present succeeded after a few trials in connecting the terminals with a

damp handkerchief and thus produced the same amount of resistance as that of a human body. To prevent this trick being attempted by Mrs. Fay these wiseacres then nailed the handles so far apart that *that* handkerchief would not reach them, forgetting that one of greater length might possibly be used. Another thing which does not appear to have occurred to these investigators is that the lady without employing any handkerchief might easily have had one hand free during the brief *séance*, by placing one of the terminals beneath her chin, or under her arm (supposing she wore a low-necked dress). To our unscientific mind the test appears most inconclusive, indeed, we have always considered these quasi-scientific tests especially unsatisfactory, as from their very complexity they afford more scope for evasion than would more simple means of restraint. In all cases of which we have ever heard or read the wrists of the medium have been tied together, or at least so near to each other as to render self-release quite possible. If Mrs. Fay were to be seated on a couch with outstretched arms, and thus secured, her feet being also fastened, we strongly suspect that no manifestations would occur. At all events until some test, far less open to suspicion than any yet adopted by Mr. Crookes, has been applied, we must decline to accept a number of hanky-panky tricks done in the dark or behind a curtain, as evidences of the existence of some “new force.” That darkness is *not* a necessary “condition” in the case of Mrs. Fay is evident from her recent public performances, in which most of the tricks were done in a roofless cabinet, there being just as much light behind as before the curtain, the only use of which was to conceal the *modus operandi*.

Mr. Wallace’s book is more voluminous and speculative than that of Mr. Crookes. He begins by “showing that the arguments of Hume, Lecky, and others against miracles are full of assumptions, fallacies, and contradictions, and are, therefore, valueless,” maintaining in opposition to them that “human testimony increases in value in such an enormous ratio with each additional independent and honest witness, that no fact ought to be rejected when attested by such a body of evidence as exists for many of the events termed supernatural or miraculous, and which occur daily amongst us.” Mr. Wallace reminds us that before he knew anything of spiritualism he was a confirmed philosophical sceptic, but he now appears to believe nearly everything which ordinarily intelligent people, to say nothing of “philosophers,” unhesitatingly reject, such as witchcraft, odic-force, clairvoyance, apparitions, mesmerism, and even phreno-mesmerism. He cites Dr. T. Edwards Clark’s account of a New York lady who could hear with the palms of her hands and read with her elbows, and remarks that it is curious that clairvoyants can only get at the exact truth by degrees. “They do not say at once ‘It is a medal,’ but ‘It is metal,’ ‘It is round and flat,’ ‘It has writing on it,’ and so on.” This, which most people would regard with suspicion as a series of guesses, indicates to Mr. Wallace “the existence of a new sense, or rudimentary perception.” He is, of course, a thoroughgoing spiritualist, the facts which came under his notice became more and more assured, more and more varied, and were so far removed from anything that modern science taught, or modern philosophy speculated on, that at last he was beaten by them. He thinks that all men of science who have rejected spiritualism, have done so without sufficient inquiry, and denies that the detection of any number of impostures is any disproof of the spiritualistic position, since those phenomena which remain unexplained may be genuine although similar things have been produced by trickery. To the crucial question “What useful information have the supposed spirits even given to man?” he says that the true answer probably is that “it is not their mission to give knowledge to man which he can acquire for himself,” but as if doubtful of the cogency of this reply he subsequently refers at some length to the utterances of trance mediums, whom he looks upon as the inspired teachers of a “new religion.” Finally he points to the enormous number of believers in spiritualism, to the long list of men of ability who have been converted to the faith, and to the fact (?) that no spiritualist has ever yet recanted his opinions.

The author of “Hints for the Evidences of Spiritualism” draws a parallel between the wonders of modern spiritualism and the miraculous events recorded in Holy Writ, and without declaring himself upon the one side or the other, contends that if we wish to be logical, we must either admit the marvels of to-day, deny those of ancient times, or give some reason for holding that what was possible then is impossible now. He maintains that the evidence in favour of spiritualism is at least as strong as any that can be alleged on behalf of any other creed, and all these arguments he applies in detail to almost every class of phenomena. The book concludes with a list of thirteen objections to spiritualism, most of which are exceedingly weak, and are apparently only cited for the purpose of refutation. With regard to the apparent dilemma in which Christians who reject spiritualism are placed, we may remark that each of the miracles of the Bible had its *raison d’être*, which the modern marvels usually lack. The levitation of Mr. Home is by no means a parallel to the ascent of the prophet Elijah, nor can the tricks with live coals and red-hot iron for one moment be compared with the preservation of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the furnace, and surely it is the height of folly to attempt to place the miserable performances of the healing mediums of modern times in the same category with the miracles of our Lord. On the whole we are inclined to think that the cause of spiritualism will not be greatly served by the lucubrations of this trio of advocates.

[\[Return\]](#)

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.