

ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE, F.R.S., D.C.L., LL.D.

The publication of a new edition of Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace's notable book on 'Miracles and Modern Spiritualism' has been already announced by us. We return to it now for the purpose of drawing special attention to the important additions to the book in this edition. The greater part of these consists of two chapters on Apparitions and Phantasms:—'Are there objective apparitions?' and 'What are phantasms, and why do they appear?' reprinted from 'The Arena.' Dr. Wallace apparently permits to himself the pardonable luxury of a kind of philosophical contempt for the theory or theories of the Sadducees, with their strained appeals to telepathy: and on this point the following significant remark is made:—

The chief difference of opinion now seems to be, whether all the facts can be explained as primarily due to telepathic impressions from a living agent—a view maintained by Mr. Podmore—or whether the spirits of the dead are in some cases the agents, as Mr. Myers thinks may be the case? But in order to give this telepathic theory even a show of probability, it is necessary to exclude or to explain away a number of the most interesting and suggestive facts collected by the Society, and also to leave out of consideration whole classes of phenomena which are altogether at variance with the hypothesis adopted.

This is a rather hard hit, but well-deserved. We are, indeed, immensely indebted to the Psychical Research Society '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.' But what is the

use of this, if some of the principal collectors of the evidence 'exclude or explain away a number of the most interesting and suggestive facts collected by the Society'? Dr. Wallace holds by the objectivity ('a term that does not necessarily imply materiality') of apparitions. As to the action of 'the unconscious self' in the production of phantasms, he says bluntly:—

Is this so-called explanation any real explanation, or anything more than a juggle of words which creates more difficulties than it solves? The conception of such a double personality in each of us, a second-self, which in most cases remains unknown to us all our lives, which is said to live an independent mental life, to have means of acquiring knowledge our normal self does not possess, to exhibit all the characteristics of a distinct individuality with a different character from our own, is surely a conception more ponderously difficult, more truly supernatural than that of a spirit world, composed of

beings who have lived, and learned, and suffered on earth, and whose mental nature still subsists after its separation from the earthly body. We shall find, too, that this latter theory explains all the facts simply and directly, that it is in accordance with all the evidence, and that in an overwhelming majority of cases it is the explanation given by the communicating intelligences themselves. On the 'second-self' theory, we have to suppose that this reconcile but worse half of ourselves, while possessing some knowledge we have not, does not know that it is part of us, or, if it knows, is a persistent liar, for in most cases it adopts a distinct name, and persists in speaking of us, its better half, in the third person.

We commend that bit of plain English to the ingenious gentlemen of the Psychical Research Society.

But the brief Preface to this edition deserves special mention. It presents our old friend in the old clear light,—simple, sincere, lucid, courageous. Over twenty eventful and sifting years have passed since the first of these Essays was written; but nothing has shaken the old ground or disturbed the old faith: and now here is the good soldier avowing once more his allegiance, and teaching his scientific brethren this greatly-needed lesson:—

It was about the year 1843 that I first became interested in psychical phenomena, owing to the violent discussion then going on as to the reality of the painless surgical operations performed on patients in the mesmeric trance by Dr. Elliotson and other English surgeons. The greatest surgical and physiological authorities of the day declared that the patients were either impostors or persons naturally insensible to pain; the operating surgeons were accused of bribing their patients; and Dr. Elliotson was described as 'polluting the temple of science.' The Medico-Chirurgical Society opposed

the reading of a paper describing an amputation during the magnetic trance, while Dr. Elliotson himself was ejected from his professorship in the University of London. It was at this time generally believed that all the now well-known phenomena of hypnotism were the result of imposture.

It so happened that in the year 1844 I heard an able lecture on mesmerism by Mr. Spencer Hall, and the lecturer assured his audience that most healthy persons could mesmerise some of their friends and reproduce many of the phenomena he had shown on the platform. This led me to try for myself, and I soon found that I could mesmerise with varying degrees of success, and before long I succeeded in producing in my own room, either alone with my patient or in the presence of friends, most of the usual phenomena. Partial or complete catalepsy, paralysis of the motor nerves in certain directions, or of any special sense, every kind of delusion produced by suggestion, insensibility to pain, and community of sensation with myself when at a considerable distance from the patient, were all



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(From a photograph by Sims, West Brompton.)

demonstrated, in such a number of patients and under such varied conditions, as to satisfy me of the genuineness of the phenomena. I thus learnt my first great lesson in the inquiry into these obscure fields of knowledge, never to accept the disbelief of great men, or their accusations of imposture or of imbecility, as of any weight when opposed to the repeated observation of facts by other men admittedly sane and honest. The whole history of science shows us that, whenever the educated and scientific men of any age have denied the facts of other investigators on *a priori* grounds of absurdity or impossibility, the deniers have always been wrong.

Dr. Wallace sees in the derided facts of Spiritualism a similar instance of scientific obscurantism, and he predicts for it a similar discomfiture. He finds the explanation of scientific repugnance to Spiritualism in the scepticism of science so far as spiritual existences are concerned. But the belief of the uneducated and unscientific multitude has rested on a broad basis of facts and is destined to be justified. He pleads for true science, which has no repugnances and foregone conclusions, but desires only facts; and, in words which we would like to send round the world, he shows his brethren the way:—

That theory is most scientific which best explains the whole series of phenomena; and I therefore claim that the spirit-hypothesis is the most scientific, since even those who oppose it most strenuously often admit that it does explain all the facts, which cannot be said of any other hypothesis.

This very brief and very imperfect sketch of the progress of opinion on the questions dealt with in the following pages leads us, I think, to some valuable and reassuring conclusions. We are taught first that human nature is not so wholly and utterly the slave of delusion as has sometimes been alleged, since almost every alleged superstition is now shown to have had a basis of fact. Secondly, those who believe, as I do, that spiritual beings can and do, subject to general laws and for certain purposes, communicate with us, and even produce material effects in the world around us, must see in the steady advance of inquiry and of interest in these questions the assurance that, so far as their beliefs are logical deductions from the phenomena they have witnessed, those beliefs will at no distant date be accepted by all truth-seeking inquirers.

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