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[p. 4]

‘Science and Miracles.’¹

Whatever may be one’s personal feelings on the subject of “spiritualism” after reading Mr. Wallace’s book, there are certain points which candour or common sense compel us to admit. These are (1) that “spiritualism” in the nineteenth century has been greatly fortified by the adherence of men of superior intelligence, and particularly men of science; (2) that the tendency of those who go in for a thorough study of the phenomena is to become converted; and (3) that, on paper, the evidence in favour of “spiritualistic” manifestations is so distinct and so overwhelming, that if the whole thing be delusion or fraud, then no amount of human evidence can ever be accepted as worth a cent. By these three admissions we stand in no way committed. It is probable that at heart we are all, hereditarily, believers to a greater or less extent in “ghosts.” We are accustomed to identify “ghosts” generally with deceased personalities. It is only when we descend from the general to the special, and are confronted with the statements of witnesses as to alleged particular manifestations that our mental gorge rises at the thought of phenomena untested by ourselves. It is doubtful whether we can ever trust implicitly to the judgment of others, when it is in favour of accepting the miraculous, although the converse is easy enough. This is not from any finicking over-caution or systematic prejudice—still less is it from malice prepense. It is simply a constitutional limitation; and the cry of Mr. Wallace, therefore, that we have stoned, and continue to stone, the prophets of the miraculous, in the teeth of historical justification, is futile as a complaint of unfair treatment. One does not deny that the scientific men who avow their interest in spiritualism have lost caste; but this is scarcely so much due to their belief in spirits as to other causes, among which we may plead contributory negligence in the matter of their own reputations. The letter of Mr. Wallace proclaiming his belief in the miracles (which he had not seen) wrought before her exposure by Eusapia Palladino, while not disputing the fact of her exposure, is a case in point. Were we to analyze the contempt which is generally felt towards spiritualistic performances, and those who indulge in them, it would not be found to consist entirely in disbelief of the phenomena (we are all wonder-seekers at heart), but largely in impatience at the banal tricks and silly vulgarities which characterise them. Mr. Wallace maintains that this attitude is irrational, because the spirits, if such they be, can only represent average humanity, and average humanity possesses a low range of intelligence. This is both his explanation of the facts and his excuse for studying them. But it does not tempt us to follow in his footsteps. In the first place, we are unacquainted with the rib-poking, table-tilting, nose-tweaking, and tambourine-banging genus of average humanity; and in the second, we desire to remain so. We doubt whether Mr. Wallace himself would care to spend long days and hours in the company of corporeal drivellers of this kind, and (granted the belief he professes) we cannot see where the charm is in their post-mortal spiritualistic inanities. Curiosity is an excuse for anything; but to go on dabbling in séances, and writing earnest works to prove that Home and Mrs. Guppy were not the frauds that people took them for, seems an unworthy occupation for a man who shared with Darwin the honour of discovering evolution. This, if we may say so, is probably the secret of the abuse which Mr. Wallace feels so keenly for himself and his brother martyrs. True, Mr. Wallace in his book talks a deal about the high moralities of spiritualism; but, honestly, has any lesson or message of worth ever come out of all this trafficking with disembodied buffoons? Were Home’s gyrations in mid-air or “Emma’s” elucidation of cracker-mottoes inside nuts

intended for symbolic utterances, like the aphasiac manifestations in Mr. Andrew Lang's tale of "Castle Perilous"? It would be cynical to ask whether they had any practical value; and, besides, the question is one much resented by seekers after pure truth. Yet the potentialities should be enormous. Slade, cited by Mr. Wallace, was able to unlock solid rings, to remove coins from a sealed-up box, and in other profitless ways (it is not stated that he kept the coins or ever robbed a bank) to show his superiority to the laws of tridimensional physics. Mr. Wallace sets out with a warm respect for natural laws, and condemns only those who are so illogical as to define a miracle as a breach thereof. We were half inclined to grant his point, so far as it referred to amending the definition; but had he quoted these ring-dissolving, box-pilfering tricks in the same connection, instead of at the other end of his book, our faith would have suffered considerable tension between Slade and the accepted dimensional limits. There is a wide difference between such feats and the purely spiritual ones contained in the following passage, which is quoted as an able—but unhappily idealised—conception of what spirits should be.

Beings of an ethereal order, if such exist, would probably possess some sense or senses, giving them increased insight into the constitution of the universe... Their every faculty might be proportionate to the modes of action of the ether. They might have a power of motion as rapid as that of light or the electric current; a power of vision as acute as that of the most powerful telescopes and microscopes. They might have a sense analogous to the powers of the spectroscope, and by it be enabled to perceive instantaneously the intimate constitution of matter under every form. Such existences would not be *supernatural*, except in a very limited and incorrect sense of the word. And if those powers were exerted in a manner to be perceived by us, the result would not be a *miracle* in the sense implied by Hume and Tyndall. There would be no "violation of a law of nature."

Without going further into controversial matters we may say that Mr. Wallace's book is probably, on the whole, the most rational and least objectionable statement of spiritualistic belief that exists. It rarely descends to the low level of vulgar miracle-mongering that is the stock in trade of the average spiritualist, and it exhibits a vague desire to be critical in respect of evidence. The new matter added since its first appearance takes in a host of modern converts, including Mr. F. W. H. Myers and Dr. Oliver Lodge; it also includes Eusapia, but not, unfortunately, her exposure. In fact, the subject of exposures is avoided throughout in a way which does not quite justify Mr. Wallace's repeated strictures upon the omissions of his principal adversary, Dr. Carpenter.

¹"Miracles and Modern Spiritualism." By Alfred Russel Wallace, D.C.L., F.R.S., &c. Revised edition. (London: George Redway.)

[\[Return\]](#)

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