

CLAIRVOYANCE AND POLTERGEISTS.

SIR,—I will make shift as well as I can to meet the principal objections brought forward by Dr. Wallace against my views on Alexis Didier's clairvoyance and on Poltergeists. To deal with them at all adequately would occupy more space than your courtesy or the tolerance of your readers would allow; and I trust Dr. Wallace will understand that in what follows I am constrained by considerations of space to pass by some points in his letter and to be briefer than I could have wished in dealing with others.

Houdin's testimony is no doubt very striking. But we must distinguish. Against the theory that Alexis' success was due to conjuring of the ordinary type, it must be admitted to be conclusive. But on the view advocated by me, that the clairvoyance of cards and sentences in closed books, etc., was probably due to preternormal acuteness of vision, conditioned by the trance, it is not so conclusive. No doubt Houdin, as a trained observer, would, if his attention had been specially directed to this possibility, have been better able than the ordinary person to pronounce judgment on it. But this acuteness of vision here supposed is a distinct thing from the rapid and comprehensive glance, the result of long training, which, as we know from Houdin himself, is part of the conjuror's equipment, and might very well pass for incredible even with an expert observer. Houdin contents himself with saying that Alexis' performances were beyond the resources of the art of conjuring.

My disbelief in this kind of clairvoyance is founded mainly on a comparison of the best reports I could find of the numerous cases in France and England during the period from 1820-50: e.g., the report of the Second French Commission on Animal Magnetism; the reports on M^{lle}. Pigeaire; and especially the very careful and varied experiments of Chauncey Hare Townshend on his subject, also a French youth. It is clear, especially from Townshend's reports (*Facts in Mesmerism*), that the exercise of the faculty had some relation to normal vision: the interposition of a screen, an extra bandage, an alteration in the position of the bandage, or in the angle at which the object was held, constantly caused the experiment to fail.

When the observers were less careful than Townshend these variations of the experiments were not tried, or their results were not recorded.

Most of the reporters on Alexis paid no attention to such small points; and no doubt the conditions of the bandaging, etc., were prescribed by Marcillet. But I referred in my article to some reports from the outside journals of this time (1844), from which it was quite clear that Alexis was very particular about the position of the bandages; and even in Dr. Lee's book I find one case in which Alexis refused to submit to the handkerchief being tied over the face (p. 272).

I cannot find anything in Dr. Lee's reports that would lead me to alter my opinion. They are very condensed; and Dr. Hodgson has abundantly shown that condensed reports in such matters are certain to omit seemingly

irrelevant details which give the key to the result. Three or four such omissions in Dr. Lee's reports I will briefly note :—

1. He nowhere mentions whether the table used for card-playing was covered with a cloth or whether the polished surface was bare.

2. He never mentions the whereabouts, and only once or twice incidentally mentions the presence, of Marcillet at the experiments. Yet Marcillet, the hypnotiser, was presumably present throughout.

3. P. 258, Séance III., after describing successful card-playing, he goes on : "Reading from a volume opened at random by the Rev. F. Robertson, twenty pages in advance." Two pages later, at the end of the account, he mentions incidentally that the *first* trial of reading, also proposed by the Rev. F. Robertson, had been a failure.

4. Again, on the same page (258) is another serious omission. Lee writes : "Sir R— G— then gave a morocco case, which Alexis said contained —," and then proceeded to describe the contents.

In an account of the same sitting by Mr. Parsons, of Brighton (*Zoist*, Vol. VII., pp. 92-3), the incident is thus described : "Sir R. Grant presented a packet containing a portrait, which had been before presented by a sceptic, and Alexis could then make nothing of it. Marcillet then proposed that the packet should be put into the hands of any other gentleman who was not a sceptic, and that the contents should be exhibited to that other person in another room. Sir R. Grant volunteered, and this was done, and the packet secured as before. Alexis now succeeded in describing the picture with particularity."

No doubt to Dr. Lee it would have seemed insufferably tedious and irrelevant to have stated in his account of each sitting where Marcillet stood, at what kind of a table Alexis played cards, what failures occurred in each experiment before success was achieved, and so on. I do not in the least question his good faith in the matter. But the little details which he omits are just what I want to know ; and their omission, whilst it makes it difficult to frame a satisfactory theory as to how Alexis could achieve the wonders reported of him, renders it impossible for us to place any confidence in Dr. Lee's conclusion, that it was all due to a hypothetical faculty of clairvoyance.

I am sorry that I should have given Dr. Wallace the impression that I reject the evidence for clairvoyance at a distance, or, generally, for that form of clairvoyance which seems allied to and merges in thought reading. The evidence of Haddock, Gregory, Townshend, Barth, and many others at that period is very strong. The evidence for the exercise of the faculty, even in the case of Alexis, seems good, and might be better if we could eliminate Marcillet, and could get more reports at first hand, and in detail.

I will now pass to the second part of Dr. Wallace's letter, which deals with Poltergeists. My argument is, briefly, the better the evidence, the less the marvel ; until when we succeed in obtaining, as we very rarely do obtain, the contemporary evidence at first hand of intelligent witnesses, we find nothing which the "naughty little girl" is not fully competent to explain.

There would not be space to criticise in detail all the nine cases which Dr. Wallace brings forward. I will discuss briefly the first three; taking these partly because they are the first three (that I may not appear to select cases specially favourable to my argument), partly because they are amongst the best known and most widely quoted narratives.

1. The Drummer of Tedworth, as told by Glanvil. The disturbances began "about the middle of April," 1661 (Glanvil only gives two exact dates in the whole narrative), and continued for about two years. Glanvil's account of it, as we learn from the preface to the fourth (posthumous) edition of *Sadducismus Triumphatus*, was first published in 1668. Glanvil himself paid one visit to the house, "about this time"—the last date given, on the previous page, being January 10th, 1662. Glanvil's account of all he saw and heard is, in brief, as follows: On hearing from a maid-servant that "it was come," he, with Mr. Mompesson and another, went up to a bedroom; "there were two modest little Girls in the Bed, between 7 and 8 Years old, as I guest." Glanvil heard a scratching in the bed "as loud as one with long Nails could make upon a Bolster." This lasted for half-an-hour and more, and Glanvil could not discover the cause; it was succeeded by a panting, like a dog, accompanied by movements in the bedding: also the windows shook; also Glanvil saw a movement in a "Linnen Bag" that hung against another bed, but was not apparently sufficiently sure of the accuracy of his observation to mention this incident in the first (1668) edition. Further, Glanvil was aroused by an untimely knocking next morning; and his horse fell ill on the way home, and died 2 or 3 days later. This is the only detailed account which we have at first hand; it is written 5 or 6 years after the events, and apparently not from full notes, as Glanvil is unable to give the exact dates.

The rest of the account is founded on the oral relation of Mr. Mompesson, confirmed by other witnesses, "and partly from his own letters." There are also two letters of Mompesson's, dated respectively 1672 and 1674. But he gives no detailed confirmation of Glanvil's account; indeed, when the second letter was written he expressly says that he had lent Glanvil's book "for the use of the Lord Hollis," the previous year, and did not know what the account contained. But even if we assume that Glanvil had accurately put down 5 or 6 years later all that he had heard from Mompesson, it does not amount to much; for it does not appear that Mompesson himself witnessed any of the more marvellous incidents—the drops of blood, the chairs moving by themselves, "the great Body with two red and glaring Eyes," and all the rest of it. These things were witnessed by neighbours, by men-servants, or by an undistributed "they." So that Glanvil's account of them may be third-hand, or tenth-hand.

3. The disturbances at the Castle of Slawensik, an account of which is preserved by Kerner in the *Seeress of Prevorst*. (I postpone for the moment Dr. Wallace's case No. 2, the Wesley Ghost.) The disturbances took place during two months in the winter of 1806-7, apparently from end of November to end of January. They are said to have been witnessed by many persons, whose names are given; but we have only one account,

written by Councillor Hahn on November 19th, 1808, and by him given to Kerner in 1828. From the fact that no dates are given it may be inferred that Hahn did not keep notes; at any rate, not accurate notes. I know no reason for doubting Hahn's honesty; but his studies of Kant and Fichte are no guarantee of his competence as a witness. In any case I submit that his unsupported testimony, given 18 months or more after the events, does not constitute "exceptionally good" evidence, even for things which he saw, or believed himself to see, with his own eyes. But many of the marvels are only given at second-hand. It was the dauntless Kern who saw in the glass the white figure of a woman looking at him; Hahn stood before the glass for a quarter of an hour and saw only his own reflection. Again, it was Kern and Hahn's servant, during Hahn's absence at Breslau, who saw a jug of beer rise from the table, as if lifted by an invisible hand, and pour out a glass half full, and the glass then raise itself in the air and tilt its contents (which disappeared without leaving a trace) down an invisible throat. Kern had evidently spent his time to more purpose than in studying Kant and Fichte.

2. But I find myself in entire agreement with Dr. Wallace in his estimate of the evidence in the Wesley case. It is perhaps the most fully authenticated case which we possess in the literature of the subject. The main disturbances lasted with intervals for the two months, December and January, 1716-17, with occasional outbreaks after that date. The records consist (1) of letters written to Samuel Wesley (John's elder brother) by his mother and his two sisters, Susannah and Emilia. These letters are dated January, February, and March, 1816-1817, that is, within a few weeks of the disturbances. (2) A copy of an account written by Samuel Wesley (John's father). The copy was made by Samuel Wesley, the son, in 1830, from a copy made by John Wesley in 1826. (3) Letters written by Mrs. Wesley and four of her daughters to John Wesley in the summer and autumn of 1726, more than nine years after the occurrences. The evidence comprised under (1), (2), and (3) was first published in 1791 by Priestley. A copy of the letters and diary in the handwriting of Samuel Wesley (John's brother), had been given to Priestley, as he explains, by the Rev. S. Badcock, who had himself received the MSS. from a granddaughter of Samuel Wesley.* (4) An account compiled in 1826 by John Wesley from the letters and from conversation with some of the other spectators, and published in the *Arminian Magazine*.

It will be instructive if we deal with each of the sets of documents separately.

1. We will take first the contemporary letters, and in the first instance we will consider only the statements made by the actual eye- or rather ear-witnesses of the things described: (a) Mrs. Wesley writes on January 12th, 1716-1717, that, beginning from an early date in December, she heard unaccountable knockings, mostly in the garret or the nursery:—"One night it made such a noise in the room over our heads, as if several people were

* *Original Letters by the Rev. John Wesley and his Friends, etc., 1791.*

walking; then run up and down stairs, and was so outrageous, that we thought the children would be frightened, so your father and I rose and went down in the dark to light a candle. Just as we came to the bottom of the broad stairs, having hold of each other, on my side there seemed as if somebody had emptied a bag of money at my feet, and on his as if all the bottles under the stairs (which were many) had been dashed in a thousand pieces. We passed through the hall into the kitchen, and got a candle and went to see the children. The next night your father would get Mr. Hoole to lie at our house, and we all sat together till one or two o'clock in the morning, and heard the knocking as usual. Sometimes it would make a noise like the winding up of a jack; at other times, as that night Mr. Hoole was with us, like a carpenter planing deals; but most commonly it knocked thrice and stopped, and then thrice again, ever so many hours together." That is practically all that Mrs. Wesley relates of her own personal experience.

(b) There are two letters from Miss Susannah Wesley, dated January 24th and March 27th. In the first she records her own experience as follows:—

"The first night I ever heard it, my sister Nancy and I were set in the dining-room. We heard something rustle on the outside of the doors that opened into the garden, then three loud knocks, immediately after other three, and in half-a-minute the same number over our heads. We enquired whether anybody had been in the garden, or in the room above us, but there was nobody. Soon after my sister Molly and I were up after all the family were abed, except my sister Nancy, about some business. We heard three bouncing thumps under our feet, which soon made us throw away our work and tumble into bed. Afterwards the tingling of the latch and warming-pan, and so it took its leave that night.

"Soon after the above mentioned we heard a noise as if a great piece of sounding metal was thrown down on the outside of our chamber. We, lying in the quietest part of the house, heard less than the rest for a pretty while, but the latter end of the night that Mr. Hoole sat up on, I lay in the nursery, when it was very violent. I then heard frequent knocks over and under the room where I lay, and at the children's bed head, which was made of boards. It seemed to rap against it very hard and loud, so that the bed shook under them. I heard something walk by my bedside, like a man in a long nightgown. The knocks were so loud that Mr. Hoole came out of their chamber to us. It still continued. My father spoke, but nothing answered. It ended that night with my father's particular knock, very fierce. It is now pretty quiet, only at our repeating the prayers for our King and prince, when it usually begins, especially when my Father says: 'Our most gracious Sovereign Lord,' etc. This my Father is angry at, and designs to say *three* instead of *two* for the royal family. We all heard the same noise, and at the same time, and as coming from the same place."

(c) There is one letter from Miss Emily, undated, but obviously written at about this time. She describes various noises, more particularly groans,

the sound as of "a vast coal" being thrown down in the kitchen; the sound as of a stone being thrown in among the bottles under the "best" stairs; "something like a quick winding up of a jack at the corner of the room by my bed's head." Knocks on the floor and elsewhere, mostly three times running.

These are all the experiences which the ladies relate at first hand. But Emily Wesley tells us that her sister Hetty heard coming down the garret-stairs behind her "something like a man, in a loose nightgown trailing after him:" that the knocks would answer Mrs. Wesley, if she stamped on the floor, and bid them do likewise; that Mrs. Wesley had seen something under a bed "like a badger, only without any head that was discernible"; and that Robin Brown, the man-servant, had seen the same creature twice, the last time in the appearance of a white rabbit.

Miss Susannah adds, under date March 27th: "Last Sunday, to my father's no small amazement, his trencher danced upon the table a pretty while, without anybody's stirring the table."

2. The account by old Mr. Wesley was obviously in great part written very shortly after the disturbances. It is not, however, dated; and it is clearly not a day by day record, as in a diary, for he is occasionally uncertain of the exact dates, and the account is mostly written as a continuous narrative. Mr. Wesley was the last to hear the noises, though he had been told what other members of the family had heard. On December 21st, "I think," he was awakened by nine loud knocks, apparently in the room next to his bedroom. Two or three nights later Mr. and Mrs. Wesley were both aroused by the loud and continuous noises, and searched the house, with the result already described in her narrative.

Thereafter he frequently heard the knocks; they answered him when he rapped with his stick knock for knock; they came on the children's bedstead, in his own study, and in almost every room in the house; they would make a great noise at family prayers at the names of King George and the Prince. He often spoke, but never received any articulate answer, "only once or twice two or three very feeble squeaks, a little louder than the chirping of a bird, but not like the noise of rats, which I have often heard." Often the latch of his bedroom would be lifted, when he was in bed. Finally, he records: "I have been thrice pushed by an invisible power, once against the corner of my desk in the study, a second time against the door of the matted chamber, a third time against the right side of the frame of my study door, as I was going in."

Of the experiences of others he tells us a good deal: that Mrs. Wesley had seen a thing "most like a badger": that "one night when the noise was great in the kitchen, and on a deal partition, and the door in the yard, the latch whereof was often lift up, my daughter Emilia went and held it fast on the inside, but it was then lifted up, and the door pushed violently against her, though nothing was to be seen on the outside": and that Robin Brown saw "something come out of the copper-hole like a rabbit, but less."

3. To turn now to the letters written in 1726. Mrs. Wesley adds to the account which she had given nine years before, that on one occasion the

sounds answered her when she knocked ; that at another time, " Upon my looking under the bed, something ran out pretty much like a badger " ; and gives the following variant of the noises heard on the nocturnal journey round the house, undertaken by herself and Mr. Wesley :—" Near the foot (of the stairs) a large pot of money seemed to be poured out at my waist, and to run jingling down my nightgown to my feet. Presently after, we heard the noise as of a vast stone thrown among several dozen of bottles which lay under the stairs, but upon our looking no hurt was done. In the hall the mastiff met us, crying and striving to get between us."

Thus, in the later version the one sound, diversely interpreted, has become two successive sounds, and various decorative details—the jingling down the nightgown, the search among the bottles, the fright of the mastiff—have been added.

So Sister Emily, in the later account, adopts and enlarges upon the description already given in her father's account (but wanting in her own earlier letter) of seeing the latch of the kitchen door move, and finding the door itself resist her efforts to shut it. So in Sister Susannah's later account, what had been described in her earlier letter as " the tingling of the latch and warming-pan," is now amplified into " the latch of the door then jarred, and seemed to be swiftly moved to and fro."

Sister Molly and sister Nancy (who were not represented in the earlier correspondence) also gave accounts of their experiences to their brother Jack in 1726. From the latter's account, which is written in the third person, apparently as representing John Wesley's notes of a conversation with her, the following extract may be quoted :—" One night she (Nancy) was sitting on the press bed, playing at cards with four of my sisters, when my sisters Molly, Etty (Hetty ?), Patty and Kezzy were in the room, and Robin Brown. The bed on which my sister Nancy sat was lifted up with her on it. She leaped down and said, ' Surely old Jeffery would not run away with her.' However, they persuaded her to sit down again, which she had scarce done, when it was again lifted up several times successively, a considerable height." This incident is not mentioned by Molly, or indeed by any of the others.

Lastly, we have an account given by Robin Brown, the servant, in 1726, to John Wesley, confirming the story of the white rabbit, already quoted, and adding this new incident :—" Soon after, being grinding corn in the garrets, and happening to stop a little, the handle of the mill was turned round with great swiftness. He said nothing vexed him, but that the mill was empty. If corn had been in it, old Jeffery might have ground his heart out for him."

John Wesley's own account, based apparently exclusively—since he was not himself a witness of any of the phenomena—on the correspondence and on conversations with his family and others in 1726, it is not necessary to consider at length. It introduces, however, one or two sensational details, such as his father's threatening with a pistol, which find no place in the earlier narratives.

Now a record of this kind suggests two questions : first, what precisely

are the things to be explained? second, what may the explanation be? Most, indeed, of the writers, who, from the days of Glanvil, have formed from a mass of similar narratives collections of supernatural seemings, have passed at once to the second question, and have found the search for a solution so fascinating, that they have never returned to look for an answer to that indispensable preliminary enquiry. Without stopping to consider whether their method is more honoured or discredited by long usage, I propose to reverse it. What, then, are the things to be explained in the Wesley case? To begin with, we are not called upon to explain what it was that made the handle of the mill turn round, to the amazement and chagrin of Robin Brown. Our problem is a simpler, if also a less alluring one—to find out, to wit, what made Robin Brown believe, nine years after, that he had seen the handle of the mill move. Again, we have got to ask, *not* what was the badger-like form which Mrs. Wesley saw; but how it came about that Mrs. Wesley's husband and daughter, in 1717, and Mrs. Wesley herself in 1726, testified that she had seen such a form. Nor need the vagaries of Mr. Wesley's trencher, nor Robin Brown's spectre "somewhat like a white rabbit," nor the door which resisted the stoutest efforts of Emilia, perplex us. Our problem, in fact, as now simplified, is to search for a rational explanation of various noises, suggesting, indeed, an intelligent, but not obviously a supernormal origin, which disturbed the Wesley household for a couple of months in 1716-7.

Old Samuel Wesley had at the time seven daughters living, of whom two, Patty and Keziah, were children, and five were, apparently, sufficiently grown up to write letters. Of these five, two are represented in the earlier correspondence, four in the later. One only, Hetty (Mehetabel) has contributed no account at all. There is no obvious reason for this silence, for Hetty, as we learn from John Wesley's account, was nineteen at the time. She had, apparently, undertaken to write, but failed to carry out her promise:* and by the testimony of all those concerned, she seems to have enjoyed more of Jeffery's attention than any other member of the household. Consider, for instance, these extracts from the correspondence:—

Mrs. Wesley writes, January 25th and 27th, 1716-7:—"All the family, as well as Robin, were asleep when your father and I went downstairs (on the nocturnal exploration already described) nor did they wake in the nursery when we held the candle close by them, only we observed that Hetty trembled exceedingly in her sleep, as she always did before the noise awaked her. It commonly was nearer her than the rest." Or consider, again, this extract from Miss Emily's letter (1717):—"No sooner was I got upstairs, and undressing for bed, but I heard a noise among many bottles that stand under the best stairs, just like the throwing of a great stone among them, which had broken them all to pieces. This made me hasten to bed; but my sister Hetty, who sits always to wait on my father going to bed, was still sitting on the lowest step of the garret stairs."

And again: "It never followed me as it did my sister Hetty. I have

* See Miss Susannah's letter of March 27th, 1717.

been with her when it has knocked under her, and when she has removed has followed, and still kept just under her feet."

Again, in Mrs. Wesley's later account, after describing loud noises which they heard in their bedroom, she writes: "Mr. Wesley leapt up, called Hetty, who alone was up, and searched every room in the house."

In sister Susannah's later account:—"Presently began knocking about a yard within the room on the floor. It then came gradually to sister Hetty's bed, who trembled strongly in her sleep. It beat very loud, three strokes at a time, on the bed's head."

And, once more, in John Wesley's version of Mr. Hoole's experience: "When we (*i.e.*, Mr. Wesley and Mr. Hoole) came into the nursery it was knocking in the next room; when we were there it was knocking in the nursery, and there it continued to knock, though we came in, particularly at the head of the bed (which was of wood), in which Miss Hetty and two of her younger sisters lay."

After the perusal of these extracts, Miss Hetty's inexplicable reticence seems more than ever to be deplored. And in view of this reticence, and of Miss Hetty's singular habit of trembling in a sound sleep when loud noises were going on all round her, and of the notable predilection shown by the Poltergeists for her person, it hardly seems worth while to enquire whether the noises which perplexed the Wesley family did indeed proceed from a supernormal source.

In brief, my contention is that the only reason for the inexplicable element to which Dr. Wallace refers in these narratives, is the defect of the evidence. When we have only secondhand accounts, or narratives written down months or years after the event—as in Glanvil's and Hahn's accounts—we find an abundance of marvellous incidents; when, as in the Wesley case, we have almost contemporary accounts at first-hand from sober-minded witnesses, the element of the marvellous is reduced to a minimum. But the peculiarly instructive feature of the Wesley letters is that we can see how the witnesses, whilst they narrate of their own personal experience only comparatively tame and uninteresting episodes, allow their imaginations to embellish somewhat the experiences of other members of the household; and that these same embellishments, *nine years later*, are incorporated in the first hand accounts, as genuine items of personal experience.

I have left little space to answer Mr. Lang's letter. But, indeed, there are not many points, I trust, in which we differ. I gladly accept the correction of my surmise (1) as to a case given by Miss Angus; and (2) I do not value the evidence of Miss Angus less, because I value that of Mrs. Piper more. Nor do I think that the strength of the Piper evidence for clairvoyance or some other supernormal faculty at all depends on the proof of the identity of her "spirits." (3) As to the Home evidence, I am not satisfied with any theory that I have yet seen; but I still think it more likely that the explanation of the phenomena attested will ultimately prove to be a psychological one; a novel form of hallucination, rather than a manifestation of a new physical force.

FRANK PODMORE.