

ON POLTERGEISTS.

SIR,—I should like to make a brief reply to the letters on this subject by Dr. Wallace and Mrs. Barker, which appeared in the *Journal* for April and May respectively.

Dr. Wallace demurs to my casting doubts on Councillor Hahn's evidence because it was given eighteen months after the events. But Dr. Wallace would no doubt admit that Hahn's evidence—however good it may be as it stands—would have been better if it had been given contemporaneously. My own view is that, in that case, though evidentially better, it might probably not have seemed to Dr. Wallace so well-adapted for his purpose.

But perhaps I may be allowed to complete my answer to Dr. Wallace by continuing the examination of the nine cases cited by him. I will take them in order.

(4) *Bealings Bells*.—The evidence is first-hand ; it is practically contemporaneous, being based on notes made at the time, and written out in full within a day or two at most ; the witness is a Fellow of the Royal Society, who records with scrupulous care the atmospheric conditions, the readings of barometer and thermometer ; and points out with justice that the phenomena cannot be explained by "the known laws of the electric theory" or the expansion of metals by rise of temperature. And yet, as a witness, Major Moor shows himself on a level with the servant girl who has her fortune told by the cards.

On February 5th, 1834,—that is, three days after the bell-ringing began,—he writes :—"I am thoroughly convinced that the ringing is by no human agency" (p. 5).

No reason is given for this conviction.

On February 27th he writes :—"It is possible" that it is all due to trickery (p. 9).

No reason is given for the change of opinion.

A few days later (p. 22) he repeats his conviction that the bells "were not rung by any mortal hand."

No new facts had come to light in the interval and no reasons are given for this second change of opinion.

Again, though devoting many pages to describing the courses and the attachments of the wires, the state of the weather and so on, Major Moor never tells us of whom his household consisted and never describes a single occasion on which, when they were all gathered together in his presence, the bell-ringing occurred. Further, a writer in the *Ipswich Journal* made the sensible suggestion that Major Moor should begin his investigations by gathering all his household into one room and posting trustworthy friends round about the house. Major Moor, in quoting the letter, adds, "I did not in any way follow the advice therein offered."

I venture to suggest, as a plausible theory, that Major Moor, in homely

phrase, "was not such a fool as he looks;" and that his book is a gentle satire on those who were ready, on such evidence as that here offered, to believe in supernormal or even unfamiliar agencies.

(5) *The Baldarroch (Banchory) disturbances.*—Mackay does not quote any authority for his statements: his account is therefore at best second-hand, and may be still more remote. But if such evidence is good at all, I submit that it is good all round. Mackay tells us not only that stones and crockery were thrown about, but that several ricks danced about the farmyard, and that the Devil was seen sitting on the top of the house.

(6) *Mary Jobson, of Sunderland.*—Dr. Wallace says that Dr. Reid Clanny "published an account of the extraordinary things witnessed by himself, and also by three other medical men and other persons, sixteen in all."

Dr. Clanny himself neither saw nor heard anything of the alleged phenomena.* Of the *five* medical men, besides Dr. Clanny, mentioned by name as having visited the girl during her illness, two only have given an account of what they witnessed. Both these, Mr. R. B. Embleton and Mr. Drury, were young men. Neither of them saw anything out of the way; but both heard knocks and loud scratchings—apparently on the foot of the wooden bedstead in which the child of 12 lay. Dr. Drury also, calling on the child after her recovery, heard at her suggestion very beautiful music, and Mr. Embleton was specially invited to hear "the voice." [There is no suggestion, on the part of the medical witnesses, that "the voice" did not proceed from the child's own vocal organs.] The voice, which Mr. Embleton describes as realising his ideas of angelic sweetness, dictated as follows:—"I am the Lord thy God that brought thee out of the land of Egypt, etc. . . . I am the physician of the Soul. This is a miracle wrought on earth . . . Mark, I am thy God sounding out of the Heavens," etc., etc. The knocks, the throwing about of water, the painting on the ceiling, and so on, which are described by the other eleven witnesses [there are *thirteen* first hand witnesses only] all of whom were apparently uneducated and superstitious neighbours, appear to me simply the puerile trickeries of a hysterical girl. Her ailment, which baffled all the physicians (or rather the three physicians who have written about the case), was as obviously hysterical as the "voices" were obviously blasphemous. The cure was as mysterious as the disease. After eight months of dropsy and convulsions (Dr. Embleton), brain disease (Dr. Clanny), intolerable torture (all the witnesses), she suddenly turned her sympathising relatives out of the room, dressed herself in a quarter of an hour, and was completely restored to health. I cannot help thinking that Dr. Clanny's enthusiastic belief in the genuineness of the case was largely due to the fact that the girl (amongst whose affable spirits were the Virgin Mary and a large circle of apostles and martyrs) told him that his name had

* Dr. Wallace may perhaps have been misled by W. Howitt, who writes (*History of the Supernatural*, Vol. II., p. 450), "Dr. Clanny saw and heard various striking phenomena in her presence." But Dr. Clanny himself saw nothing, and only heard some knocks in his bedroom, not demonstrably connected with the girl at all, which occurred weeks after the phenomena in her presence had ceased.

been favourably mentioned to her at different times by Jesus Christ, St. Paul, and St. Peter. Dr. Clanny quotes this amazing statement in all seriousness.

(7) *The Disturbances at Arensburg.*—As Dr. Wallace tells us, the facts were communicated* to Dale Owen by M^{lle} de Guldenstubbé and her brother. They had heard them from the late Baron. The account, as it reaches us, is therefore third-hand. Neither Dale Owen nor his informants profess to have seen the documents which constitute the strength of the evidence. Until we have a certified copy of those documents, the case, I submit, is not before the court.

(8) *Stone-throwing in Paris.*—The evidence in this case consists of an account drawn up for the *Gazette des Tribunaux* by a writer who does not give his name and who does not profess to have been an eye-witness of the events. From the appearance of this anonymous account in a semi-official organ [for the *Gazette* is not, I understand, strictly speaking an official publication], it is perhaps safe to infer that the stones were thrown and that the police were puzzled. So far the evidence is good. But we should not be justified in inferring anything else.

(9) *The disturbances in Cideville.*—This is, on the face of it, the most promising, with the exception of the Wesley case, of all the narratives cited by Dr. Wallace. The witnesses—a Marquis, the local Mayor, the Curé, various gentry from neighbouring châteaux, etc.—were numerous, respectable, and may be presumed to have been intelligent; they gave their evidence whilst the disturbances were still proceeding; and, lastly, most of them gave it with all due formality in a Court of Law. Unfortunately I have not seen a copy of the original depositions, which were printed and circulated in 1852 by the Marquis de Mirville. De Mirville does not reprint them in his book "*Des Esprits.*" He contents himself there with a summary, given in his own words, without full details of place, time or circumstances. Nor is the character of De Mirville's account—an excited and incoherent jumble of fragments of evidence, interspersed with rhetorical appeals to the unbelievers—at all calculated to inspire confidence in his competence as a reporter. Dale Owen's account of the matter, which is based on the actual depositions contained in De Mirville's earlier pamphlet, is more valuable. But the testimony, as Dale Owen presents it, is not only translated, but very much abridged. The case is a very curious and interesting one; but unless the original documents can be referred to (perhaps Dr. Wallace can say whether De Mirville's pamphlet is still accessible) it would be scarcely profitable to discuss it at length. The case, as far as can be judged, is of the usual type—movements of furniture and small objects, and various noises, and, in particular, raps which answered questions. The whole of the phenomena occurred, it would seem, generally, if not exclusively, in the presence of two small boys, and ceased entirely with their removal.

I am sorry to find that I had not made my argument clear to Mrs. Barker: and I am the more sorry because I can see that the fault is partly my own. In the sentence which Mrs. Barker quotes from my letter I draw

* Not, it is to be presumed, in writing: Dale Owen's words are, "The facts above narrated were detailed to me," etc.

the conclusion that the Epworth disturbances were caused by Miss Hetty Wesley. The evidence is hardly sufficient to justify that conclusion: nor is that conclusion necessary to the argument. If, indeed, I were required to specify the agency in the Epworth knockings, I should say that on the evidence before us the most probable explanation is that Hetty Wesley caused them: that she caused them deliberately: and that she caused them by the exertion of her proper muscular powers, without assistance from disembodied spirits, or even from pseudopodia, odyllic force, astral emanations, or other supernormal supplement.

But on the evidence in this particular case, Hetty's agency in the matter is, at most, probable. What seems to me, however, practically certain, on an analysis and comparison of all the cases which I have yet examined, is that Hetty, or some other human girl or boy, without metaphysical aid of any kind, has been the sole agent in all such disturbances. I am led to that conclusion—reluctantly, and against my own preconceived beliefs—by two main lines of argument:—

(1) We have positive evidence that in some cases tricky little girls or boys have thrown about the less expensive crockery and upset the kitchen furniture with their own carnal hands, whilst the onlookers have accepted the portent as a manifestation of supernormal powers.

(2) We have, speaking broadly, *no evidence* (and by "no evidence" I mean no good evidence: and by "good evidence" I mean evidence from competent witnesses, at first-hand, and written down within a few hours of the events) for anything having been done which could not have been done by a girl or boy of slightly more than the average naughtiness.

(3) As a subsidiary argument, I find, in the few cases where the records are sufficiently full to admit of such a comparison being made, that when second-hand accounts and first-hand accounts of the same incidents are compared: or when accounts written down at the time are compared with accounts written down long afterwards; or accounts given by an excitable and ignorant witness with those of an educated and competent observer; that the marvellous features which appear in the one set of reports are almost or altogether wanting in the other.

Now the peculiar value of the Wesley records, as I pointed out, lies in their fulness; we have the (unfortunately very rare) opportunity of seeing the same incident described by different persons—by the person who witnessed it, and by the persons who only heard of it: we are also able to compare different versions of the same incident given by the actual witness shortly after the event, and at an interval of many years.

I have endeavoured to show that, while in the earlier first-hand accounts there is nothing inexplicable by trickery, in the second-hand and later first-hand accounts the mythopoeic faculty has been at work, and has so magnified and distorted the facts as to make them seem inexplicable.

When any records can be produced as full as those in the Wesley case, and pointing to some supernormal agency as conclusively as these point to trickery and the fallacy of human memories, it will be time to consider seriously the question of the Poltergeist.