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‘Correspondence.’

To the Editor of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*.

Sir,—No one can be more disposed than I am to receive with respect anything that a man of Mr. Alfred Russel Wallace’s scientific eminence has to say about Spiritualism. At the same time, I cannot but think that the “Account of a Spiritualistic Test,” contributed by him to the *June Journal*, is somewhat disheartening to any one hoping to obtain through Spiritualism evidence that the dead can communicate with the living. We must suppose that the case that Mr. Wallace has brought forward fairly represents, in his view, the best attainable evidence; and, if so, the best attainable evidence would seem to be quite inadequate to sustain the conclusion which he draws from it.

The whole proof of the intervention of extra-human intelligence is briefly this. At a séance attended by General Lippitt a veiled figure appears, calling herself Nellie Morris. She is uncalled for, unconnected with any one present, and unknown to them all. But it is ascertained that the particulars which she gives about herself are true of a real Nellie Morris who had died at a hotel at Philadelphia a few years before. Subsequently, at other séances with other mediums, Nellie Morris again presents herself to General Lippitt. That, I think, is substantially the whole case—for I do not understand General Lippitt to lay stress on any precautions to prevent personation by the medium or accomplices.

Mr. Wallace and General Lippitt, as I understand them, consider that the evidence of extra-human intelligence rests (1), on the improbability that the first medium, Mrs. Beste, would know the particulars given about Nellie Morris, and (2) the improbability that, having once interested General Lippitt in Nellie Morris, she would make this fact known to other mediums. I am unable, however, to see on what grounds either of these things is regarded as improbable. The details given about Nellie Morris were no secrets, they might have been known to anyone and therefore to the medium; and her choice being unrestricted, she was free to select anyone about whom she happened to know particulars which could be easily verified. As to the second

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point, it appears to me that concerting together to deceive Spiritualists or investigators of General Lippitt’s importance, would be among the rudiments of the art of fraudulent mediumship. For such concert as would be required would be easy and safe, and would, if successful, add to the reputation of both mediums and detract from neither; while there would be good reason to hope that, with so great a frequenter of séances as General Lippitt, the little trouble involved would not be thrown away; since a man in a prominent social position, and especially one who also has held public office and is an author, can hardly conceal his identity by merely omitting to give his name.

But Mr. Wallace thinks that even this little trouble would not be worth taking, because “no advertisement of the mediums concerned was to be expected” from General Lippitt. No doubt the mediums concerned would like to be advertised, but published accounts of séances are not the only form of advertisement. General Lippitt does not hide his faith; and more inquirers and converts are likely to result from keeping alive the interest in the subject of a man of his known position and integrity, than from letters to Spiritualistic journals by unknown men.

The whole “test,” then, crumbles away. The improbability that General Lippitt was deceived is only the improbability that the mediums would wish to deceive him, and surely we cannot reasonably reckon this great, even apart from the evidence of imposture, which we have as regards several of them.

A few words on another “test” related by General Lippitt. The supposed spirit of his daughter Carrie brought a message at a séance in 1884 that she was “happy with mother Elizabeth, and we here celebrate her birthday (February 25th) much after the manner we did on earth.” Here knowledge is shown of two facts—the name and the birthday of General Lippitt's first wife, —the second of which was, he feels sure, unknown to all except himself and his mother-in-law at the time of the séance. But Miss Carrie Lippitt had been dead less than two years. In her lifetime, unless the message was a lying one, she kept her mother's birthday. How, then, can General Lippitt be justified in feeling sure that no one knew it? One can imagine many ways in which it may have come to the medium's knowledge. She may, for instance, have known a servant who was in the house when the birthday was being kept.

There are few facts about any of us so secret that we can feel sure no one knows them, and we may be—probably are—frequently astonished by some out-of-the-way bit of knowledge displayed about us. It is obviously the interest of fraudulent mediums to collect such information in order to astonish their sitters, and therefore, I think that, under ordinary circumstances, but little importance ought to be attached to extraordinary knowledge shown by mediums *when it is selected by themselves*. General Lippitt would have been rightly impressed if, without any leading up or prompting on the part of the medium, he had asked what was the date of his wife's birthday, and been answered correctly—and still more so if he had asked for the birthday of some one entirely unconnected with him, which he happened accidentally to know. But this is very different from what actually happened, when the information was selected and offered by the medium (or spirit) herself. General Lippitt relies on his having been unknown to the medium, but in this, as I implied before, I cannot but think that he shows too much modesty. —I am, sir, your obedient servant,

Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick

*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2021.