

[*The English Review*]

SCIENTIFIC MEN AND SPIRITUALISM: A SKEPTIC'S ANALYSIS

BY JOSEPH McCABE

THE growth of Spiritualism is one of the themes of the season; and it must be admitted that it does not promise a contribution to that intellectual sanity which is one of the most pressing of our social needs. No doubt the growth is generally much exaggerated. The most sober estimate of the number of Spiritualists in the 'fifties of the last century runs to a million. A semi-official estimate in the year 1917 gave the figure of 200,000 for the entire world. We have even to-day nothing approaching the remarkable epidemic which found luxurious conditions of growth in rural America in the last century, and for some years spread its intellectual blight over Europe.

Frivolous as some of our journals are, they would hardly to-day open their columns to a serious discussion whether a lady medium, of a particularly massive build, had really been transported by spirits from Highbury to Lamb's Conduit Street, through several solid walls, in the space of three minutes.

Such as it is, however, the epidemic is alarming enough in view of our particular need of clear-headedness and sense of reality. And there is one factor in the recent growth which is particularly irritating. Spiritualism spreads in waves, its periodic advances separated by decades of obscurity and discredit. The chief reason for this is that a decade of prosperity brings to the front a regiment of brazen im-

postors, and ends in a series of sensational exposures. There have been exposures enough in the last two decades, but our generation was not much interested in the subject, and they generally escaped notice. The time was fairly ripe for another advance. A war which removed five million men in adolescence or early manhood inevitably gave the opportunity, and the Sludges of the world came out of their dark corners.

Luckily for themselves they converted one of our most popular novelists, and he perambulated the country, from the south coast to Aberdeen, preaching the 'new revelation.' As usual, the press magnified the phenomenon and our semi-hysterical generation hastened to see and hear the latest novelty.

But there is a more serious element of the situation that deserves special consideration. From the start there were scientific men who unfortunately lent their names to the popular cult. Professor Crookes in London, Professor Hare in America, rigged up some pseudo-scientific apparatus, which smart conjurers soon mastered and evaded, and gave the blessing of 'science' to the movement. De Morgan and other professors were nearly caught, and were much too lenient in their language. The number of these men grew less as time went on, and, when Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir William Barrett lent their names to it, their weight was counterbalanced by

the general disdain of their colleagues.

Since 1890, however, there has been formed on the Continent quite a school of scientific men who have endorsed the worst pieces of charlatany in the Spiritualist movement — levitations and materializations. The Italians took the lead, partly because of the peculiar intellectual condition of Italy in the last decade of the nineteenth century, partly because Italy produced one of the astutest mediums yet seen, Eusapia Palladino. Men like Daniel D. Home and Stainton Moses had had an easy run. They performed only before small audiences of their choice. Slade had had a rare piece of luck in Germany, for of the four eminent professors who endorsed his miracles, one was mentally disturbed, one was nearly blind, and two were shortsighted; and it took a special delegate from America to discover so much as this.

But Eusapia Palladino faced group after group of professors and medical men. That she converted poor Lombroso does not now surprise us. His daughter, Gina Ferrero, tells us in her biography of her father that during his later years he suffered so badly from arteriosclerosis that his mental and physical health was wrecked. Apart from Lombroso, however, quite a large number of academic and professional men — Chiaia, Foa, Bottazzi, Morselli, Porro, Imoda, etc. — endorsed the performances of Palladino, and unwillingly lent great strength to a superstition which they professed to detest.

I will deal later with this 'psychic school' and its 'telekinetic' phenomena, and will consider here a weird development of it in France and Germany. Except Lombroso, who in his old age formulated a theory that the mind is an immortal material fluid, none of these men are Spiritualists. Most of

them despise Spiritualism. They have at least a sufficient sense of humor to resent the idea that the lofty beings of Vale-Owen land stroll along from their Elysian fields to thump tambourines, and tug the beards and moustaches of professors in darkened chambers. There, however, their sense of humor ends. They credit mediums with 'abnormal' powers. One medium has a 'telekinetic' power, and can lift tables and pull furniture about without touching them. Another medium has 'teleplastic' power, and can project material from his body, mould it into an arm or a face or a whole body, and pose for the camera or imprint a face in wax.

The extraordinary thing is that one finds a number of physiologists in the school. It is relatively easy for physicists like Lodge and Barrett to believe in miracles, but how a man who knows what a hand or a face really is can entertain the idea of a medium 'forming' one out of spare cells of her own body in the course of a quarter or half an hour passes comprehension. The known regenerative power of the human organism is such that it will restore a very limited area of a bruised limb in the course of several months. These men believe that certain mediums have the power of releasing matter from their bodies (without injury) and moulding it into limbs which can grasp (and so have bones and muscles), and faces which, imprinted in putty or wax, show the same structure and solid frame as ordinary human faces.

This description sounds necessarily so like caricature that I will hasten to the facts. Professor Charles Richet was, like the astronomer Flammarion and the distinguished lawyer Maxwell, one of the French savants who were duped by Palladino. They studied her at intervals from 1892 to 1908; yet

they maintained, and maintain, that the majority of her phenomena were genuinely abnormal. By the beginning of this century Richet was a confirmed occultist, and was drawn into an adventure of a singular description.

General Noel, who lived in Algiers, sent word that a remarkably powerful medium had appeared in his family, and full materializations were seen almost daily. Richet went to the General's house, the Villa Carmen, in 1903. He was not convinced, but in 1905 he went for a longer stay, and he yielded entirely. The medium was a young woman whom he named 'Marthe B,' daughter of a retired French officer (rank not stated). Her position in the Villa Carmen was unusual. She lived there, and was affianced to the General's son. In introducing her later and greater performances at Paris, Baron Von Schrenck-Notzing duly gives us a description of her physique and morale.

He describes her as having moral sentiments 'only in the ego-centric sense,' as not a virgin, and as having 'a very erotic imagination.' She was nineteen years old in 1905. Her *fiancé* had died in 1904, but she remained in the house and consoled the bereaved parents by putting them into communication with the next world. They sat in a darkened kiosk in the garden, and Marthe often had associated with her, as a second medium, a black servant named Aischa. The chief ghost to appear at the opening of the cabinet, when Marthe and Aischa sat in it, was a deceased Arab chief, of whom Professor Richet gives us admirable photographs, taken by magnesium flare. One sees only the eyes and nose, which are singularly like those of Marthe. The rest is brass hat, bushy beard, and white drapery. The light was the usual red lantern, except at the moment of photographing.

Professor Richet, who is a distinguished physiologist, devised an experiment to test if the ghost was a lay figure. He brought a flask of baryta water, which clouds if carbon-laden air is breathed through it. The ghost obligingly breathed through it, and it was clouded. He felt the ghost's hand. It was warm and solid. In other words, he proved by demonstration that the ghost was a living person, the medium; yet this distinguished professor of physiology then hastened to inform the world that he had discovered a genuine case of materialization in Algiers.

Many will remember how the Spiritualist world was excited and heartened by these 'Villa Carmen manifestations' in 1906. Presently the curtain fell again, and we wondered what had happened. At the very time when the English Spiritualists were exulting over the new proof, it was being undone in Paris. An Algiers lawyer, M. Marsault, had been at the Villa Carmen *séances* as early as 1900, and seen the fraud. In 1904 Marthe confessed to him that it was all humbug, and he warned Richet. But Marthe, in order to clear herself, had spoken of a trap door and of the impersonation of the ghost by others; and, as there was no trap door, Richet continued to believe in materialization.

Most people saw the justice of M. Marsault's case, and the Villa Carmen sank into obscurity. Another bright star fell from the mediumistic sky. The scholars of the psychic school, however, continued their hopeful researches. In 1908 they discussed, and eventually dismissed, the famous American materialization medium Miller. Then their attention was given to Linda Gazerra and Lucia Sordi, two new Italian mediums. Dr. Imoda, assistant of Professor Mosso, studied Gazerra, and photographed her ghosts,

for three years. She was a middle-class lady, too morally sensitive to submit to search, and she had imported dolls, drapery, and even birds in her false hair and her underclothing. Lucia Sordi was an athlete of the robust-peasant type. She also duped academic students of the psychic school for years. They then brought the Australian medium, Bailey, to France, and had a fresh disillusion. Next, a genuine unpaid materialization medium, of good social position, was reported from Costa Rica, and Professor Richet rushed off to San José. It was a cruder fraud than any. All these disillusions occurred within four years.

Meantime a new star had appeared in Paris itself. M. Bisson, a French writer, was interested in the 'new science.' His wife was even more interested, especially when M. Bisson died; and she had the good fortune, as so many aristocratic French ladies have, to discover a genuine materializing medium. The young lady was of good family, and preferred to remain anonymous. She was introduced to strangers as 'Rose Dupont' and to the scientific world at large as 'Eva C.' Under what name she was introduced to Professor Richet, who again endorsed the performance, we do not know. But it is hardly possible to doubt that M. Richet recognized his old friend, Marthe Beraud, of the egocentric moral sentiments. In some of her early 'materializations' she wore the brass hat, scrubby beard, and white drapery of 'Bien Boa,' the dead Arab chief of the Villa Carmen.

Among the many medical men and professors initiated at Mme. Bisson's house was Baron Von Schrenck-Notzing, an aristocratic and leisured medical man of Munich. He took the phenomena very seriously. He devised the most rigorous control of

the medium, raised the lights to a daring pitch of illumination, fired five cameras at a time at the ghost, and even installed a cinematograph. The young woman was stripped before every performance, and sewn into something like 'tights' of black cloth. Her mouth, nostrils, ears, and armpits were examined. There was a superficial examination of the lower part of her body. Once a nurse examined her more thoroughly, and once or twice — 'Eva' was in a trance, so the question of modesty does not arise — she invited Baron Schrenck himself to verify that she was not concealing apparatus in a more delicate part of her person.

After three years of research under these rigorous conditions, Baron Schrenck burst upon the astonished world with his *Materializations-Phénomene* (1914). Mme. Bisson brought out a smaller work, with the same photographs, but it is too discreet and tendencious to be of any use. I was amused when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle produced this book of Mme. Bisson's in his debate with me at the Queen's Hall, and told the audience that it was 'the insanity of incredulity' for me to waive it aside. The battle (over Baron Schrenck's fuller German version) had been won five years before.

As late as 1914, Richet wrote that he was thoroughly convinced of the genuineness of Marthe Beraud, and he presumably still holds that conviction. Several other educationists and professional men of France and Germany shared his conviction. The case will probably rank in years to come with the 'Katie King' experiments of Sir W. Crookes, to which Richet often refers as a parallel. And there is no doubt that the Spiritualists build upon the opinion of these men. Even Baron Schrenck disdains Spiritualism, and claims only a mysterious 'teleplastic' power on the part of the medium.

That makes little difference. It is the facts that matter. Indeed, the general public will probably regard the Spiritualist theory as less unreasonable than the theory of these learned professors.

One need not linger to-day over the 'facts,' except in the sense that they show an extraordinary credulity in men of the 'new science' and a remarkable ingenuity on the part of the mediums. But as a translation of Baron Schrenck's book is shortly to appear in English, to strengthen the faith of our Spiritualists, a few observations on it will not be superfluous.

Its special value is supposed to lie in the 150 photographs of materializations which it contains. When we ask for *séances* in good light, we are told that white light prevents the 'development of the phenomena.' This did not surprise us, as any illusionist could do most surprising things in a dull red light, the most fatiguing and baffling light that the eye can endure. However, it was of some interest to learn that Baron Schrenck's incessant magnesium flares did no harm either to ghost or medium. He was even allowed to pour on a sufficiently strong stream of white light to use the cinematograph while the phenomena developed. The progress in illumination was, in fact, instructive. For months no photographs were permitted, and the *drawings* which Baron Schrenck gives for these early *séances* are useless. Marthe then lost all nervousness before her scientific audience, and permitted an illumination which gives us every detail plainly.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle tells his readers that 'you see the ectoplasm pouring from the medium's nose, eyes, ears, and skin.' Where he got either the word 'ectoplasm' or this impression of the photographs, I cannot imagine. What you see at first are bits of chiffon or muslin, white gloves, pos-

sibly inflated fish bladders, and other compressible and expansible articles, hanging from the medium's mouth or fastened to her hair or clothing or breasts or to the curtain. For a variation she occasionally masquerade as a ghost. The Baron calls this 'transfiguration' of the medium. He is compelled to recognize that it is she, so he falls back upon the usual subterfuge of 'unconscious action in a trance.' She is hypnotized before every performance. The trance is, of course, a sham. She is obviously awake all the time. In one photograph a 'spirit hand' reaches out for a cigarette. As both of Marthe's hands are visible, you are puzzled for a moment; until, on looking closely, you perceive that the hand is a bare foot. You then realize that what purports to be her face is a bit of muslin. She is bending backward and lifting her left foot high to represent a hand.

After some months she begins to 'materialize' human heads. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's picture of 'this viscous ectoplasm, forming an amorphous cloud, and finally moulding itself into human faces and human figures,' is pure fancy. There are wisps and streaks of cloudy stuff—muslin or other thin material—but the idea that this moulds itself, and is 'gradually suffused with life,' and on one occasion steps into the room and embraces Mme. Bisson, is a finer flight of fiction than any adventure of Sherlock Holmes. As I said, on one or two occasions Marthe Beraud was the ghost, and could leave the cabinet. In all other cases where human forms appeared, the curtains were kept closed until the girl was ready, music was supplied (at her request) to drown any noise of her movements, and she had a quarter or half an hour to arrange the 'peep-show.'

The faces are quite obviously il

lustrations cut out of the French papers. The corners are sometimes curled, and they show the marks of the scissors. One ghost is President Wilson, with a heavy cavalry moustache and a black eye; but the collar and tie correspond to a hair with the contemporary portrait of Wilson in *Le Miroir*, and the girl had not succeeded in entirely washing away even the tiepin (an American flag, apparently). Poincaré and other celebrities, crudely painted over, appear. On Poincaré she sticks a very crude and obvious paper nose, to give a plastic effect and conceal his three warts. A hundred of the 'ghosts' are so crude, so obviously flat paper surfaces, that the effrontery of the medium is amazing.

A critical medical colleague, who was invited to attend, took a powerful electric torch and examined the cloth-covered cabinet. He found, all over the back of it, the groups of pin-holes where the girl had pinned up her portraits. On one or two photographs you see the black pin quite plainly. On one photograph, which was taken prematurely, Marthe is clearly dangling the ghost on the end of a string, to make it, as Sir Arthur says, 'suffused with life.' Baron Schrenck was forced to admit that she stuck or pinned up the objects and that she had deceptively smuggled pins into the cabinet, in spite of his rigid control. He then noticed that the 'ghosts' generally showed marks of having been folded up. He heard the rustle of paper in the cabinet, and even found bits of paper on the floor. He still clung to his theory. Another doctor pointed out that there are such things as human 'ruminants,' who can lower things into their gullet or stomach and bring them up at will; and he remembered that Marthe occasionally bled from the mouth or gullet after a sitting.

For seven sittings (four of which were quite barren) he put a net over her head. But she stipulated that her dress be left open when the net was on, and she very soon forced them to lay it aside. One day some accident happened to her 'ghost,' and the camera inside the cabinet disclosed the remarkable title *Le Miroir!* The next day she gave it a symbolical meaning.

In short, although Baron Schrenck, Professor Richet, Doctor Geley, and other scientific and medical men cling to the 'abnormal' theory, the whole three years' investigation really turned into a farce. It was admitted that 'Eva C.' was Marthe Beraud; and it is clear that she concealed her light and compressible material about her body. That is really the chief interest of the matter. For fifty years mediums were never searched, and sitters were as flagrantly duped as Sir W. Crookes was by Florrie Cook. The numerous exposures in the 'eighties and 'nineties led to the practice of stripping mediums, and 'phenomena' became rarer. In most cases, of course, the medium is still not searched. Modesty is a valuable part of a lady medium's outfit. But inquirers of this 'psychic school' considered that they really were safe when the medium allowed a search. We now know differently. A radiograph would not give away the secret of a 'ruminant'; and scores of such people are known to medical men.

For the credit of Morselli and other leaders of the 'new science,' I must add that they by no means agree with Professor Richet and his French and German colleagues in indorsing this comedy. They rely mainly on 'telekinetic' manifestations, which I trust to examine later. But nearly all of them—and they number probably twenty or thirty scientific and professional men, including men so distinguished as Richet, Morselli, and

Flammarion — do accept this ‘teleplastic’ power in some degree. It is a scientific monstrosity. The only point open to consideration is whether, in a few cases, some mediums like Marthe Beraud may not develop an abnormal secretion of mucus, and blow or trail it from the mouth, making it assume a fantastic appearance in the red light. On the whole, the supposed materializations are really bits of flimsy stuff, thin rubber, or other compressible and expansible material, plainly stuck about her person or the cabinet. A little less of this kind of ‘science’ and a little more common sense is advisable.

The chief mischief is that, if mediums can thus stand the scrutiny of scientific men for years, the uneducated public is misled. Spiritualist leaders go about saying that their theory is

proved by science to be ‘absolutely true.’ Sir A. C. Doyle assures them that for thirty years men of science have studied their phenomena, and all who have joined in the inquiry have indorsed the facts. We begin to understand the note of arrogance that has crept into Spiritualist literature. It is quite time that some of our scientific authorities gave proper guidance to the public on the subject. Silent contempt never killed a popular superstition. If we have no wish to undo the democratization of power, at least let us hurry on with the democratization of that moderate degree of mental culture which is known as common sense. A habit of nursing illusions in religion will not refuse its hospitality to illusions in politics or economics.

[*The Anglo-French Review*]

A SOLDIER-TRAVELER IN FRANCE

BY ALBERT KINROSS

THERE are occasions when some precious person, whom one has, perhaps, met at a tea party, says with a mingling of pity and amazement: ‘You do not know the novels of Merejkowski!’ Or it may be the pictures of Walter Bayes. I have just confessed as much. I am ignorant of the works of either master; and far from feeling humble or ashamed, my air is one of pleasurable anticipation. ‘What would life be if every world were discovered?’ I ask. ‘I have a delight in store for me which you can never renew.’ And then, a trifle maliciously, I say: ‘Have you ever been lost in a London fog and

tumbled into the pond on Hampstead Heath? I have. It is a most exciting experience.’ She turns up her nose at me and walks away.

When the war began, France to me was something like those novels and those pictures. It is a disgraceful confession, and yet one that I make with gratitude. For some inexplicable reason I knew a dozen other countries, but France was still a mystery unsealed. And I am glad of it; for during the time — all too brief — that I spent there, my leisure was a perpetual and enchanting labor. I knew the zest of exploration and discovery; here was a