

that these crystal-pictures are experiments in the extension and externalisation of inward or central vision; and that the inward or central vision which we thus externalise by empirical artifices may ultimately become for us even fuller of instruction than that outward or peripheral vision on which mankind are accustomed exclusively to rely. The highest use, perhaps, of this optical vision of the material world is to teach us an alphabet,—a scheme of visual presentations,—whereby we may behold, “as in a mirror, darkly,” truths not only material but spiritual which lie outside and beyond our optical scope and horizon.

V.

EXTRACT FROM J^SE DE MIRVILLE'S

“DES ESPRITS ET DE LEURS MANIFESTATIONS FLUIDIQUES.”

(Paris, 1854). *Third Edition*, Vol. I., Ch. I : pp. 18-32.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY ALFRED R. WALLACE.

In the last Part of the *Proceedings* (December, 1898) Mr. Podmore, in the preliminary remarks to his “Discussion of Trance-Phenomena of Mrs. Piper,” devotes more than five pages to an examination of the evidence for clairvoyance in the case of Alexis Didier, which evidence he depreciates throughout, and arrives at the conclusion that Alexis might have been, and probably was, a clever impostor. He urges that “bandaging the eyes,” as described, was not “satisfactory;” that many indications showed “that the power exercised by Alexis was perfectly normal;” that the reading a book several pages in advance of any page opened at random was “the most strongly suggestive of trickery”; and that the most probable explanation of his card-playing performances “is that of deliberate fraud.” He urges that his manager, Marcellet, might have been a confederate, and that the reports “are mostly at second-hand or insufficiently detailed.” He quotes lengthy reports of some of the special instances of clairvoyance which were of such a nature as to be explained by thought-reading, but says nothing of those in which facts were correctly given which were not known to any one present; and, finally, he omits all reference to the most remarkable and convincing evidence of Robert Houdin, whose testimony has been quoted by Dr. Lee, by myself, and by many other well-known writers, while a detailed report of it is to be found in the great work of the Marquis de Mirville to be seen in the Society’s library.

When preparing my reply to Mr. Podmore (which appeared in the *Journal* of February) I borrowed De Mirville’s work, and for the first time read his detailed account of Houdin’s experiences certified as correct by Houdin himself. This account seemed to me to be so important, as well as so intrinsically interesting, that I suggested the printing of a translation of it in our *Proceedings*. To this the Editor has assented, and the following very close translation has been kindly made by Mr. J. G. Smith. So far as I am aware, it now appears for the first time in English, although it has been known

to a few students for nearly half a century; and, if it is admitted that the question is one of evidence, it must be held to prove the reality of the clairvoyance of Alexis, both that kind due to thought-reading and that termed "true clairvoyance" in which the objects described is not known to any one present or, as in the case of the cards dealt by Houdin and the book brought and opened by himself, to any living person.

In his rejoinder (in the *March Journal*) Mr. Podmore admits that "Houdin's testimony is, no doubt, very striking"; but he urges that it is not conclusive as against the theory that subjects in trance may possess "preternatural acuteness of vision." To this I would reply that any such preternatural acuteness of vision as here required has never been *proved* to exist, but has been *suggested* as the only means of explaining phenomena deemed too incredible for acceptance on any testimony; and, further, that if trance patients can see through cards, and tables, and eight pages of a printed book, to admit such "acuteness of vision" is only to admit "clairvoyance" under another name.

I would here earnestly call the attention of our members to an important elementary principle of sound reasoning too often neglected in discussions of these questions—that, as tersely stated by J. S. Mill, "an argument is not answered till it is answered at its best," and that no amount of negative or indirect evidence is of any weight as against good, positive, and direct evidence on the other side. I ask them to compare carefully this evidence of De Mirville and Houdin with that adduced by Mr. Podmore, and they will find that while the former consists of the very best *direct* evidence of *facts*, the latter is wholly negative, consisting of doubts, suspicions, and possibilities, every one of which is excluded in the direct evidence here given.

This fundamental defect applies, in my opinion, to all Mr. Podmore's writings on this subject.

Translation.

You all know *Robert Houdin*, and you will deny to this Prince Conjurers neither the pre-eminence to which his skill entitles him, nor consequently, his entire competency as a judge of the skill of others.

Evidently, to put an end to this everlasting and unsound argument, the only thing to do was to go and find *Robert Houdin* himself.

No sooner said than done. I am shown into his drawing-room, and an interview begins.

¹ [i.e., that as Robert Houdin could, by trickery, do everything that clairvoyants did, and even more, there was no reason to suppose supernatural power in the case of clairvoyants.—Translator's note.]

I am going now to give a careful word-for-word report, with all the accuracy of the *Monteur*, of everything that subsequently took place.

M. Houdin's signature will guarantee the truth of the record.

"Monsieur Robert Houdin, I am an admirer of your second sight, but will you kindly tell me if you have any knowledge of magnetism? Have you seen any somnambulists?"

"A slight knowledge, Monsieur; I have seen only two somnambulists."

"What did you think of them?"

"Their tricks were so badly done, so contemptible, that I could, then and there, have given them a lesson."

"So you regard a somnambulist as a *brother conjurer*, and often as a clumsy one."

"But how else would you regard him? After all, as I said before, I have seen only these two poor specimens. All I can say is that in the course of a journey that I made in Belgium, to Brussels, Liège, and Aix-la-Chapelle, I constantly followed M. Laurent and Mlle. Prudence, two of your 'magnetic' celebrities, and I can assure you that the day after their seances I invariably dispirited, as if by enchantment, their triumph of the previous night. Whereupon, to my great regret (for I have always a genuine dislike to causing any one the smallest injury), the kind of stupor of admiration that they had caused was suddenly turned into sarcasm, insults, and even coarse abuse, the outcome of absolute incredulity. However, to do them justice, I must add that, a few days later, and with a courage that I can only describe as heroic, they returned to the charge, and succeeded in the very same towns in reversing public opinion, and in conquering afresh what I had just deprived them of. I have often since reflected on this fact, and have found no explanation of it."

"Do you want an explanation, and would you be curious to see a *genuine* magnetic, or rather somnambulist phenomenon?"

"That has long been my wish."

"Would you consent to accompany me and spare me a few moments of your time?"

"Although I am very busy just now, nothing would give me greater pleasure."

"Very well, I will not ask you, in the unlikely event of your being convinced, if you would have the honesty to acknowledge it and further to subscribe to your convictions; I will not ask you to do so, for I already read in your face the entire frankness of your reply."

"Rest assured, Monsieur, in that case you will have no cause to be dissatisfied with me."

"It will be delightful then to show the savants, whom we were speaking of just now, that love of truth has flown to you for refuge. But don't forget to bring with you some cards (orthodox ones, mind, not *your*s), a book, some hairs, etc., in fact anything which could best contribute to settle your convictions."

"Have no fear. I know what I'm about. Can Madame Houdin come with us?"

"Most certainly."

"All right, I will come back at one o'clock to fetch you."

It was then 12 o'clock, and when I got into my carriage, R. Houdin heard me give the address of 42, Rue de la Victoire for the first time, and have underlined the words "*for the first time*," because there are plenty of magnetisers in Paris, and nothing having intimated beforehand our choice of one more than another, there could have been no time to foresee or forestall that choice.

On the way the future neophyte employed all the resources of dialectic (no difficult task in such cases) to prove to me what he considered as self-evident, namely, that it was all a question of *degrees* more or less elaborate, and of a *repertoire* better "staged" than the average. At the moment of our arrival the oracle is performing in the adjoining room for the benefit of several people. Presently one of them (M. Prosper G—t) comes out, greatly impressed by having just been given a description of his country house, situated at the opposite extremity of France, down to the series of pictures hanging in his bedroom. Further than this, after a description of all the out-houses, stables, and finally of the dog kennel, M. G—t had added:

"Could you tell me the name of the powerful animal that sleeps in the kennel?"

"His name is—wait—his name's Es . . . Esterl—and it's the name of the guide who got him for you."

Here we, too, found ourselves on familiar ground; for who does not know Esterl, the smartest and wildest of all the *Faux Bonnes guides*? I have often passed several hours together in M. Mercier's salon, amusing myself with the kind of stupefaction (there is no other word for it) stamped on the faces of the sitters, very different from the expression which they wore on entering.

Evidently, it had required very personal and private revelations to bring them to such a degree. But I was forgetting that the persons who attended there one after another, from morning to night, were, one and all, private accomplices.

However, to return to the investigation of M. Houdin, who is now about to face with Alexis.

Alexis exhibits on waking the drawn features, the peculiar look, the neurotic stamp so characteristic of somnambulists, which alone would amply convincing to a doctor's eye. Then gradually the face regains its composure, the colour returns, until on being put to sleep again by the magnetiser by means of a simple pressure of the arm, a slight and barely perceptible convulsion once more shakes his whole system, and plunges him into a somnambulant state.

Robert Houdin, who is an adept in such matters, asks leave to handle Alexis' eyes himself. After a careful examination of the wadding and the enormous silk handkerchiefs that were handed to him, he covers the eyes of the subject's face with the wadding. But after folding two of the handkerchiefs over the rolls of cotton wool, which enveloped the face as though it were a most precious statuette, and which from the top of the forehead below the lips did not allow of the very thinnest opening, he declined to do the third, and did not require, as certain doctors do, a complete mask, the reason being that R. Houdin knows his business and the Prince of Conti

does not bother about such trifles. These two most suspicious eyes once well encased in wadding and covered with bandages, with all the chinks stopped up, so to speak, R. Houdin drew from his pocket two packs of cards still in their wrappers with the Government stamp intact, opened them, shuffled and asked Alexis to cut. He does so, and, I must admit, does so in some special way, which I do not remark, but which brings a passing smile to the lips of the expert observer. It is clear that Robert Houdin has noticed something, and thinks he recognises the trick, and any one but myself would have trembled for the success of the experiment. Nevertheless he lays down five cards before his opponent, who takes good care not to touch them, gives himself five and is just going to pick them up, when Alexis stops him with the words: "You needn't do that. I take every trick," and names the ten cards which are still lying on the table face downwards.

"Let us begin again," says R. Houdin coldly, stunned though he was, as if by a heavy blow.

"With pleasure."

Ten fresh cards are substituted for the first lot, and this time there was no smiling.

"I discard," says R. Houdin.

"Why do you keep these two cards, and this very weak trump too?"

"Never mind, give me three more."

"Here they are."

"What are they?" says Houdin, covering them with both hands.

"Queen of Diamonds, Queen of Clubs, and eight of Clubs."

"Go on, a third round."

Same accuracy and infallibility.

It is now my turn to watch, and what do I see?

R. Houdin fixes Alexis with those remarkable eyes of his; he changes colour, his face grows livid, and a kind of nervous quiver passes over his features, and then, with the passionate excitement of an artist who suddenly recognises his master, cries,

"What is this? What's happening? It is SPLENDID."

Then, as used to happen in the *Chambor* after a fine speech, the sitting is perforce suspended for a time. A fresh start is made, and R. Houdin, after faking off the somnambulist's useless bandages, draws a book of his own from his pocket, and asks him to read eight pages further on, starting from a given place. Alexis pricks the page two thirds of the way down with a pin, and reads, *Après cette triste cérémonie.*

"Stop," says R. Houdin, "that's enough. I will look."

Nothing like it on the eighth page, but on the next page at the same height are these words, "Après cette triste cérémonie."

"That's enough," says Houdin. "What a marvel! Can you tell me who wrote me this letter?" Alexis feels it, puts it on the top of his head, and against his stomach, and describes the writer fairly accurately, but he makes what a doctor would call *mistakes*. Trifling mistakes, however; for instance, he is mistaken as to the shade of the hair, and as to his profession, calling him a librarian, because he sees him surrounded by books. Briefly, errors of detail, such as somnambulists are constantly being forced to

commit when too closely pressed. . . . R. Houdin does not allow the errors of detail to stop him, and, returning to the subject of the letter, asks: "Where does it come from?"

"From —,"

"Ah," says R. Houdin, "and the postmark. I never thought of this."

But since you see this house, can you tell me in what street it stands?"

"Wait. Give me a pencil." After five minutes' reflection, he wrote rapidly, "Rue d'A—, Number —," "This is too much, says R. Houdin. 'It's beyond me. I don't want any more. One word more, though. What is the writer of the letter doing at this moment?'"

"What is he doing? Take care. Be on your guard. He is betraying your confidence at this very moment."

"Oh! that is an utter mistake," says Houdin, "for the writer is one of my best and most trusted friends."

"Take care," repeats Alexis, this time in an oracular tone, "he is deceiving you shamefully."

"Nonsense," replies Houdin.

Madame Houdin now takes a turn at asking questions.

"Could you tell me, Monsieur, what I am thinking of at this moment?"

"Give me your hand. What are you thinking of? Wait. You are thinking of a child, of a very young child. Ah! poor mother, how sorry am for you!"

Madame Houdin, who, so far, had endeavoured to keep a smiling countenance in order to mislead him, sheds a few tears.

"But, Monsieur, you can see him, then!"

"Yes. He died on the 15th of last July."

"At what o'clock?"

"Four o'clock in the morning."

"At Paris?"

"No. Three leagues from Paris. Wait. Ah! It was too late."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you changed the wet nurse too late. You know how well; the child was poisoned by the first nurse's milk. The poor young man was very ill."

"Oh! that's quite true, quite accurate. And could you tell me what you are thinking of now?"

"Alas! You're thinking of a still younger child, for it is not yet a year alive."

This was as a matter of fact the subject of Madame Houdin's thought, whose maternal hopes were anticipating the future. Thereupon Alexis seeing me writing in a pocket-book, snatches it from my hands, places it quickly on his head and reads from it two or three lines written in pencil which we find on the page named.

¹ We hasten to add that last year, on my paying another visit to Robert Houdin in company with my friend, M. Jacordaire, Manager of the Gobelins Manufacture, his first words were: "You remember, Monsieur, the famous letter of my friend living at —, and my repeated denials to Alexis." "Yes." "Well, this wretched friend was robbing me of 10,000 francs at the very time of the sitting." It will be admitted that this development has given a more serious turn to the matter.

A curious thing then occurred, which we submit to the consideration of persons interested in this inexplicable agency. In the pocket-book was a loose object.

"What is it, Alexis?"

"A piece of cardboard."

"Yes, but what exactly is the cardboard?"

"I don't know; it is surrounded by little short engraved lines, but I don't know what they are."

"Try hard. It isn't difficult; a piece of cardboard in a pocket-book."

"Wait. It's a large visiting card—a card on which steel pens are displayed for sale—a tradesman's address."

Nothing of the kind, and the capricious faculty of the somnambulist could not succeed in guessing an *adresse*. A certain doctor of my acquaintance would have been triumphant and have quickly closed the sitting as usual. We continued.

"And the paper next to it?"

"The one folded in four?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that's very different and not difficult. 'Receipt of M.M. Saquier and Bray, booksellers, 64, Rue des Saints-Pères, for 15 francs, 20 cents.'"

R. Houdin opens the paper and verifies the correctness of this statement. Astonishment greater than ever. On second thoughts, however, he says:—

"As far as I'm concerned this is not evidence, Monsieur, for I have not the honour of your acquaintance, and though I am, personally, convinced that you are not in league with the somnambulist, yet I must act as though you were so on this occasion. Allow me then to confine myself to matters within my own personal knowledge, and to make one last experiment."

"To whom does this hair belong?"

"To a young man."

"Who may that be?"

"Your son."

"What age?"

"Three years less than you allow him to be."

"True. What is he suffering from? He is ill."

"Yes. He suffers much pain in the right side. But wait. You have just touched these hairs, and I have made a confusion in the fluids. It's you who are suffering in the right side, and at this very moment."

"That's quite true; but how about my son?"

"Your son? He has nothing the matter with him."

"Yes, he has. Try again; there's something wrong with him. Don't you see anything?"

Alexis feels himself all over, moving his hand over his legs, stomach, heart, chest, and head, but perceives nothing.

"Try again."

"Ah! I've got it. But do you mean to say you worry about that? About this faint little speck that I can just see on the right extremity of the right eye? You think that it's the beginning of amaurosis, and he is miserable about it. It's true the doctors . . . but make your mind quite easy."

Don't do anything. Your son, I tell you, is in perfect health. He's no sixteen years and three months old; at eighteen it will have disappeared.

"It's astounding," exclaims R. Houdin. "That's enough. Let us go away. Wake him up."

Marcellet breathes upon the somnambulist's face, the nervous symptoms which accompanied the entrancement reappear, but in reversed order, the vital functions gradually resume their ordinary course, and finally the medium returns completely to his ordinary every-day existence.

The two investigators withdrew in silent astonishment, and on reaching the street, I said:—

"Well, what about jugglery?"

"*Monsieur, if the world contained a juggler capable of performing the miracles, he would, quid juggler, astound me a thousand times more than the mysterious agent whom you have just shown me.*"

"If you like I will take you straight away to see ten others, and you will witness more or less the same phenomena."

"I assure you that there is no necessity."

"I can rely then on your keeping your promise."

"I am a man of my word, *Monsieur*, and no base promptings of interest or of vanity will have any effect on me."

"Quite so, and the moment I saw you I never doubted your good faith. But explain to me then why you smiled when the cards were cut before your first hand of *écarté*."

"I merely thought I noticed a coincidence between the cards cut and the number of cards required."

"But I always hear it said that your games of *écarté* and those of *Alé* are as like as two peas."

"Ah! *Monsieur*, that may seem so to a man of no experience in the matters, to the ordinary person, (though even then such a mistake is hardly admissible), but to the expert!—Just consider, *Monsieur*, that all my cards are faked, marked, often of unequal sizes, or at least artistically arranged. Again, I have my signals and telegraphs. But in this case a fresh pack is used, which I had just taken out of its wrapper, and which the somnambulist cannot have studied. There is another point, where deception is impossible, namely, in the handling of the cards: in the one case, the artfulness of the performance, in the other, that tell-tale air of effort which nothing can entirely disguise. Add to that his total blindness, for need insist on the impossibility—the absolute impossibility—of his having seen *Beatrix*, even supposing he could see, how can we account for the other phenomena? With regard to my own 'second-sight' performances, without being able to divulge my secret to you now, bear in mind what I am careful to tell you every evening, that I only promise a second sight! consequently in my case a first sight is indispensable."

The following day R. Houdin gave me the following signed statement:

"While I am by no means inclined to accept the compliments which *M—* is kind enough to pay me, and while I am particularly anxious that my signature should not be held to prejudice in any way my opinion either for or against magnetism, still I cannot refrain from affirming that the incidents recorded above are ABSOLUTELY CORRECT, and that the

I think about them the more impossible I find it to class them with those which form the subject of my profession and of my performances.

"May 4th, 1847."

"ROBERT HOUDIN."

A fortnight later, I received another letter, as follows:—

"*Monsieur*,—As I informed you, I was anxious to have a second sitting. This sitting, which was held at Marcellet's house yesterday, proved even more extraordinary than the first, and has left me without a shadow of doubt as to the clairvoyance of Alexis. I went to this séance fully determined to keep a careful watch on the game of *écarté*, which had astounded me so much before. This time I took much greater precautions than at the first séance; for distrusting myself I took with me a friend, whose natural imperturbability enabled him to form a cool judgment and helped to steady mine. I append an account of what took place, and you will see that trickery could never have produced such results as those which I am about to recount. I undo a pack of cards, which I had brought with me in a marked wrapper to guard against another pack being substituted for it. I shuffle, and it's my deal. I deal with every precaution known to a man well up in all the dodges of his profession. It's all of no use, Alexis stops me, and pointing to one of the cards that I had just placed in front of him on the table, says:

"'I've got the king.'"

"But you can't possibly know yet; the trump card has not been turned up."

"'You'll see,' he replies. 'Go on.'"

"As a matter of fact I turn up the eight of Diamonds, and his was the King of Diamonds. The game was continued in an odd enough manner, for he told me the cards that I had to play, though my cards were hidden under the table and held close together in my hands. To each lead of mine he played one of his own cards without turning it up, and it was always the right card to have played against mine. I left this séance then in the greatest possible state of amazement, and convinced of the utter impossibility of chance or conjuring having been responsible for such marvellous results.—Yours, etc.,

"16 May, 1847."

"(Signed)

ROBERT HOUDIN."