

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON MEDIUMISTIC PHENOMENA.

THE Committee on Mediumistic Phenomena has no definitely concluded piece of work to offer. An account of what has been done during the year, however, with a few reflections, may not be out of place.

Mr. Glendower Evans's untimely death, and Mr. T. W. Higginson's resignation, reduced the committee to two members, — Mr. M. J. Savage and Dr. W. N. Bullard. The undersigned, who had resigned, joined the committee again in March. We held no formal meetings as a committee, but each did what work he had opportunity for. Mr. Savage's departure for Europe has made a report from him impossible, although he spent many hours in the service, with results which it is hoped may some day be completed and see the light. Dr. Bullard has no report to make.

My own time was chiefly divided between two mediums, — one a trance-medium, whom, at her request, I shall call Mrs. P.; the other, Miss Helen Berry, whose public "materializing" manifestations are reputed to be among the best of their class.

Concerning Miss Berry, there is little to say. Test conditions against fraud are not habitually offered at her seances. On one

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occasion it was granted to Mr. Savage to sit behind the cabinet, others being in front, whilst I explored it after the medium's entrance, and found no confederate concealed. A trap-door seemed out of the question. In a minute two forms emerged from the cabinet. But this was our first sitting, and for certain reasons we cannot call the experiment satisfactory until we have an opportunity of taking part in it again. The real test of the Berry's genuineness is supposed to be the resemblance of the forms to deceased friends of the sitters, and the character of what they say. A large amount of testimony can be collected from sitters as to the unmistakable identity of the forms with their dead wives, husbands, brothers, etc.

I visited twelve seances, and took with me, or sent, personal friends enough to have, in all, first-hand reports of thirty-five visits, embracing sixteen or seventeen seances. No spirit form came directly to any one of us, so we offer no opinion regarding the phenomena.

To turn to the much simpler and more satisfactory case of Mrs. P. This lady can at will pass into a trance condition, in which she is "controlled" by a power purporting to be the spirit of a French doctor, who serves as intermediary between the sitter and deceased friends. This is the ordinary type of trance-mediumship at the present day. I have myself witnessed a dozen of her trances, and have testimony at first hand from twenty-five sitters, all but one of whom were virtually introduced to Mrs. P. by myself.

Of five of the sittings we have *verbatim* stenographic reports. Twelve of the sitters, who in most cases sat singly, got nothing from the medium but unknown names or trivial talk. Four of these were members of the society, and of their sittings *verbatim* reports were taken.

Fifteen of the sitters were surprised at the communications they received, names and facts being mentioned at the first interview which it seemed improbable should have been known to the medium in a normal way. The probability that she possessed no clew as to the sitter's identity, was, I believe, in each and all of these fifteen cases, sufficient. But of only one of them is there a stenographic report; so that, unfortunately for the medium, the evidence in her favor is, although more abundant, less exact in quality than some of that which will be counted against her.

Of these fifteen sitters, five, all ladies, were blood relatives, and two (I myself being one) were men connected by marriage with the family to which they belonged. Two other connections of this family are included in the twelve who got nothing. The medium showed a most startling intimacy with this family's affairs, talking of many

matters known to no one outside, and which gossip could not possibly have conveyed to her ears. The details would prove nothing to the reader, unless printed in *extenso*, with full notes by the sitters. It reverts, after all, to personal conviction. My own conviction is not evidence, but it seems fitting to record it. I am persuaded of the medium's honesty, and of the genuineness of her trance; and although at first disposed to think that the "hits" she made were either lucky coincidences, or the result of knowledge on her part of who the sitter was and of his or her family affairs, I now believe her to be in possession of a power as yet unexplained.

The most promising way of investigating phenomena like this seems to be that of learning a great deal about one "Subject," who, of course, ought to be a good specimen of the class. Hitherto we have heard a little about a great many Subjects. Stenographic reports are expensive, but they seem indispensable for a conclusive discussion of the facts. They do away with doubts about the veracity of the sitter's memory; and they enable us to make a comparison of different sittings, which without them is hardly possible at all. Questions arise as to the irrelevant names and facts which almost every sitting to some extent contains. Are they improvisations of the moment? Are they in themselves right and coherent, but addressed to the wrong sitter? Or are they vestiges of former sittings, now emerging as part of the automatism of the medium's brain? A reading of the stenographic reports already taken makes it probable that, for some of them at least, this last explanation is correct. "Spirits" originally appearing to me have appeared in the sittings of others who knew nothing either of their persons or their names.

What science wants is a context to make the trance-phenomena continuous with other physiological and psychological facts. Curious to ascertain whether there were continuity between the medium-trance and the ordinary hypnotic trance, I made some observations *ad hoc* upon Mrs. P. My first two attempts to hypnotize her were unsuccessful. Between the second time and the third, I suggested to her "Control" in the medium-trance that he should make her a mesmeric subject for me. He agreed. (A suggestion of this sort made by the operator in one hypnotic trance would probably have some effect on the next.) She became partially hypnotized on the third trial; but the effect was so slight that I ascribe it rather to the effect of repetition than to the suggestion made. By the fifth trial she had become a pretty good hypnotic subject, as far as muscular phenomena and automatic imitations of speech and gesture go; but I could not affect her consciousness, or otherwise get her beyond this

point. Her condition in this semi-hypnosis is very different from her medium-trance. The latter is characterized by great muscular unrest, even her ears moving vigorously in a way impossible to her in her waking state. But in hypnosis her muscular relaxation and weakness are extreme. She often makes several efforts to speak ere her voice becomes audible; and to get a strong contraction of the hand, for example, express manipulation and suggestion must be practised. The automatic imitations I spoke of are in the first instance very weak, and only become strong after repetition. Her pupils contract in the medium-trance. Suggestions to the "Control" that he should make her recollect after the trance what she had been saying were accepted, but had no result. In the hypnotic-trance such a suggestion will often make the patient remember all that has happened.

No sign of thought-transference — as tested by card and diagram-guessing — has been found in her, either in the hypnotic condition just described, or immediately after it; although her "Control" in the medium-trance has said that he would bring them about. So far as tried (only twice), no right guessing of cards in the medium-trance. She was twice tried with epistolary letters in the medium-trance, — once indicating the contents in a way rather surprising to the sitter; once failing. In her normal waking state she made one hundred and twenty-seven guesses at playing-cards looked at by me, — I sometimes touching her, sometimes not. Suit right (first guess) thirty-eight times, — an excess of only six over the "probable" number of thirty-two, — obviously affording no distinct evidence of thought-transference. Trials of the "willing game," and attempts at automatic writing, gave similarly negative results. So far as the evidence goes, then, her medium-trance seems an isolated feature in her psychology. This would of itself be an important result if it could be established and generalized, but the record is obviously too imperfect for confident conclusions to be drawn from it in any direction. Being compelled by other work to abandon the subject for the present, these notes are published merely as a suggestion of lines of inquiry which others may be better fitted than myself to carry out.

If a good trance-subject could be obtained for the society at the outset of her or his career, and kept from doing miscellaneous work until patiently and thoroughly observed and experimented on, with stenographic reports of trances, and as much attention paid to failures and errors as to successes, I am disposed to think that the results would in any event be of scientific value, and would be worth the somewhat high expense which they necessarily would entail. If the friends of spiritualism would contribute money for the thorough

carrying out of any such scheme, they would probably do as much as by any one thing could be done, to bring about the "recognition" of trance-mediumship by scientific men.

As for the other kinds of mediumistic phenomena, I have during the past year been very much struck by the volume of evidence which can be collected in their favor. But the mere volume of evidence is of no account unless it can be proved that the evidence is likely to be of the ordinary human sort, bad and good mixed together in the usual proportion. If it is possible that it is unusually bad in quality, the quantity of it is of little account. Now, that there are reasons for believing its quality to be in these matters below the average, no one familiar with the facts can doubt. Only the establishment of one or two absolutely and coercively proven cases — of materialization, for example — will show that the hearsay evidence for that phenomenon may be mixed. And only then can the volume of evidence already extant on the subject be taken into account by one who has no direct personal experience on which to rely. The ordinary disbeliever rules out all hearsay evidence in advance. The believer accepts far too much of it, because he knows that some of it is good. The committee of the society should first devote itself to the very exact and complete study of a few particular cases. These may consume much labor and time. But if, after studying them, it should reach favorable conclusions, it would do vastly more to make the vaguer testimony already extant influential with the society as a whole, than it could do by discussing such testimony now.

WILLIAM JAMES.