

PHYSICAL PHENOMENA AT A PRIVATE CIRCLE.

By William James.

A fortnight ago I heard that, at a private circle of spiritualists in a New England town, a table had been bodily lifted from the floor with no contact but that of fingers to its upper surface. The rarity of the case induced me to make a visit to the town in question, where I have had three sittings with the circle and from whence I now write.

The circle is composed of solid citizens of the town and their wives or sisters. They have sat weekly for a couple of years, and impressed me as perfectly sincere and earnest in their quest of facts. They use a four-cornered and four-legged table of wood, thirteen pounds in weight, on the center of which a revolving disc twenty inches in diameter, bearing an alphabet, has been pivoted. The disc revolves with a minimum of friction, and an index hand, pivoted independently, points to the letters and spells messages. The sitters' fingers may be placed on the edges of the table an inch below the disc or on the disc itself. To avoid too much pressure on the rotating disc, a ring or rail of thick brass wire has been adjusted to the corners of the table, surrounding the disc at four inches' distance, on which the wrists of those present may rest while they lay their finger tips on the disc. This ring slides with a moderate friction through four brass collars which sustain it, and which themselves are sustained by brass stems screwed to the angles of the table. The disc and the ring are thus concentric. [I go into these details about the ring for reasons which will appear presently.]

For nearly three years nothing happened at this circle but answers to questions by tipping, and messages spelt out by the disc. No one present seemed to be exclusively the medium, tho' one lady, absent from town at the time of my visit, was considered to have the most "power."

I.

Of the first physical phenomenon I got only oral testimony. This was the fact on two occasions, in the autumn of 1907, of explosive sounds as "loud as a pistol shot," seeming to occur each time in the room where the sitting was being held. On one occasion the sound was repeated seven times. On the other, the sitting being held in a house a couple of miles distant from the first one, it occurred but once. It was entirely unexpected and unexplained, seems to have startled everyone very much, and all present believed that it was spiritual.

II.

The second physical phenomenon obtained by the circle was the following: I copy the account from the diary of the circle's proceedings, under date of November 24th, 1907.

"At this meeting we at first took large center table, placed ordinary finger-bowls on table, one for each person, and partly filled with water. Mrs. M.'s bowl moved with just her fingers in the water, not touching the bowl in any way. Made intelligent movements, moving towards Mr. R. when asked. Other bowls also moved, but fingers had to be in contact with them in some manner."

The five witnesses have signed their names to this record for me. They say that the bowl "waltzed round the edge of the table," that they had tried the experiment on other evenings, but that this was the only attempt that succeeded.

III.

The next phenomenon of the kind which happened is given in the following account which I wrote down from the oral testimony of seven of the eight witnesses, and to which all but the absent one have appended their signatures, though they are willing to have these printed.

"On the night of November 19th, 1908, we, the undersigned, were having a sitting round the table used for many months in our experiments. [The table I have described above.—W. J.]

On the occasion in question our finger-tips were all resting on the top of the disc, so that they could not possibly exert any lift-

ing force whatever on the table. The hands of Mrs. B. alone were in the air, a few inches above the center of the disc. After some of the usual tiltings of the table, with two or three of the legs off the ground, *it rose gently and with all four legs off the ground to the height of six inches or more*, to the great surprise of all of us, and remained in the air two or three seconds, subsiding slowly to the ground.

Some said that the sensation of resistance to their fingers was as if the table were supported by a spiral spring.

Immediately after this a message was spelt out, ordering Mrs. B. to join her hands above the table with those of Mr. D. The same phenomenon was then repeated twice over, the table rising the last time to what seemed to be ten inches from the floor.

[Here follow the signatures.]

IV.

My own first visit was on Thursday, Dec. 3, 1908. [Thursday is the night on which the circle habitually sits.] Eight persons, counting myself, were present, three women, five men.

We sat at first with our fingers on the solid table beneath the disc, and various tippings came. Then, with our wrists or palms on the ring and our fingers on the disc various messages were spelt.

Mrs. B., whose fifth sitting it was, had her fingers automatically jerked away whenever she placed them on the disc. This had happened previously; and, during the previous lifting of the table on Nov. 19th, she had held her hands in the air some inches above the disc. She kept them in that situation on this present occasion whenever we made attempts to have the table lifted. Such attempts were several times repeated, but with no success.

On the controls then being asked whether they could not make the disc rotate without contact, they spelt "no."

Suddenly, while we were sitting with our wrists on the brass ring and our fingers on the disc, which turned and spelled, *we perceived that the ring or rail itself was moving*. It had never done this on any previous evening. The phenomenon was consequently unexpected, and seemed to strike all present with surprise.

Some one immediately suggested that all wrists should be

lifted, and then, in brilliant light, and no one's hands in any way in contact with the rail, our fingers, however, resting on the disc, we all distinctly saw the rail or ring *slide slowly and for several inches through the collars, as if spontaneously.*

We then stuck a mark upon the ring to make its motion more obvious, and repeated five or six times the experiment, the same result ensuing, though more slightly each time. It always took the contact of our wrists to start the rail, but *its motion continued when the contact ceased.* This was not from its acquired momentum, for we ascertained that the friction of the collars which held the rail stopped instantly every motion imparted voluntarily by the hand.

On the succeeding Saturday and Sunday evenings, we sat again (one of the ladies being absent), but nothing but the usual tilting of the table and spelling of messages occurred.

So much for the "record," which all present have signed. It will be observed that all the phenomena reported (save the movements of the finger bowl) were unexpected and startling to the spectators. The explosions and the table's rising seem to have been eminently so, and to have made a great impression.

On December 3rd, when the ring revolved, the conditions of observation were perfect, the light (from an electric chandelier just overhead) being brilliant, and the phenomena being slow enough, and often enough repeated, to leave my own mind in no doubt at the time as to what was witnessed. I was quite convinced that I saw that no hand was on the ring while it was moving. The maximum length of its path under these circumstances was fully six inches. With this conviction that I saw all there was to see, I have to confess that I am surprised that the phenomenon affected me emotionally so little. I may add, as a psychological fact, that now, after four days' interval, my mind seems strongly inclined not to "count" the observation, as if it were too exceptional to have been probable. I have only once before seen an object moved "paradoxically," and then the conditions were unsatisfactory. But I have supposed that if I could once see the same thing "satisfactorily," the levee by which scientific opinion protects nature would be cracked for me, and I

should be as one watching an incipient overflow of the Mississippi of the supernatural into the fields of orthodox culture. I find, however, that I look on nature with unaltered eyes to-day, and that my orthodox habits tend to extrude this would-be levee-breaker. It forms too much of an exception.

Nevertheless, in the somewhat scandalously divided state of opinion about Eusapia Paladino, I think that every approach to similar phenomena observed anywhere ought to be recorded. It may be that the frequency rather than the quality of the records, will establish their "case."