

CHAMBERS'S EDINBURGH JOURNAL

CONDUCTED BY WILLIAM AND ROBERT CHAMBERS, EDITORS OF 'CHAMBERS'S INFORMATION FOR THE PEOPLE,' 'CHAMBERS'S EDUCATIONAL COURSE,' &c.

No. 490. NEW SERIES.

SATURDAY, MAY 21, 1853.

PRICE 1½d.

THE SPIRITS COME TO TOWN.

In our late article on the Rappings, or so-called Spiritual Manifestations of America, it was anticipated that they would soon be heard of in England; and such has proved to be the case. In the *Times* newspaper throughout the last month, there were advertisements from three different Mediums, offering opportunities of witnessing these wonderful phenomena in London. They had not up to that time attracted much public attention. The press had taken hardly any notice of them; and such notice as it did take, was chiefly in the way of scepticism and derision. Nevertheless, a considerable number of persons in the upper circles of society had been at Mrs Hayden's, or had had her at their houses. The other two Mediums were as yet comparatively obscure and little resorted to. It was at the same time rumoured, that a lady of rank and a baronet had severally had spiritual communications in their own homes. Hearing of these things, we requested of a gentleman, who is accustomed to contribute to our pages, the favour of his going to the various Mediums, and communicating to us exactly what he saw going on amongst them; judging that our readers could not but feel some curiosity regarding what appears as a singular retrogression into effete superstitions. He has complied with our wish, and we publish his communication without any comment of our own.

'In attempting to gratify you in your wishes, I deemed it proper to go first to Mrs Hayden's, as she has had the honour of being the first to introduce spirit-rappings into this country. I found her at No. 22 Queen Anne Street, Cavendish Square, attended by her husband, who was till lately the editor of a Boston newspaper. She is a good-looking woman, of about thirty; self-possessed, but of not displeasing manners. Three or four other persons having assembled, we sat down at a round table, along with the Medium, Mr Hayden sometimes lounging at the fireplace, but oftener engaged in his own affairs in another room. When the company was settled into perfect quietness, the lady, stooping down towards the table, asked: "Are there any spirits present? If so, will they be pleased to manifest themselves?" In a minute or two, a faint ticking noise, hardly distinguishable at first from a creaking of furniture, was heard, as if in the body of the timber constituting the surface of the table. By the Medium's instructions, one of the company, a lady, asked if the spirit wished to communicate with her. No tapping being heard in reply, a negative is inferred. Then another, and another, asked the question in succession, till at length a slight tapping implied an affirmative. I need not describe how various indivi-

duals in the company obtained communications through the alphabet, as you have already explained the process. I may mention, however, a few of the results. One lady entered into communication with the spirit of a deceased infant daughter, who, after stating the place of her death, and the disease of which she died, both truly, said: "I hover around you like an angel, trying to make you happy." An old gentleman, having evoked the spirit of a person he thought of, had her name spelled out—"Harrison" (or some such name), which he explained to be that of a lady deceased thirty years ago, and the dearest friend he had ever had in life. A medical gentleman obtained a communication from the spirit of a nephew of Dr Channing, with whom he had once carried on a correspondence on metaphysical-religious questions, and who stated that he had died at Boston about three weeks ago—an event of which the experimenter had not yet heard. This spirit was asked various questions on religious matters, to which sensible answers were given. I can only remember, that the views of Swedenborg were spoken of with peculiar approbation. A spirit was good enough to communicate with myself. "Was it a relation?"—Yes. "My father (who is long deceased)?"—No. "A brother?"—Yes. "In what year did he leave this earthly sphere? (words directly expressive of mortality being unpleasant to the spirits)"—1833. "The initial of the month?"—F. "The day of the month?"—15. All this was right. Then an address from the spirit to me was spelled out, expressive, however, merely of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and the grace of God towards his creatures. Afterwards this spirit gave himself a wrong Christian name, gave his father's correctly, and then his mother's erroneously. I was not conscious at the time of acting in such a way, in my pointings at the letters, as to give any hint of which were the true ones; but I became fully convinced next day, on reflection, that a clever person in the capacity of Medium might in most cases detect a significant pause at the letter which the experimenter knew to be the right one, and would thus be able easily to spell out the expected words and sentences.

'I revisited Mrs Hayden several times, and witnessed many similar "manifestations." On one occasion, a young man was present, who obtained intelligence of the death of a brother long lost in distant lands; also the secret of a murder which he suspected to have taken place in his family. The spirit was asked if he should take measures to bring the guilty party to justice; but this was discommended. The spirits, we were informed, are generally tender towards the reputations and interests of living persons. An unmarried literary lady was present on one occasion,

and had her somewhat extraordinary name correctly spelled. Then the spirit gave her own name as Sarah Traft, appearing to have been a servant in the family, for she was familiar with various circumstances in its history, particularly the death of two young boys, which took place before the experimenter was born. On being asked by the lady to give the maiden name of her mother, it was clearly and readily given as "Hannah Hilditch." A little after this lady had concluded her experiments, one of her rings burst upon her finger, to the great increase of the wonder already excited in the company.

'It would be tedious to describe more of the proceedings at these séances. I may mention, however, that many persons obtained what they considered curious revelations, and that the number of mistakes was comparatively small, although sometimes of a nature to give great support to those who held the whole to be an imposture. Sometimes the spirit which came proved to be a different person from the one invoked or expected; generally a stranger to the inquirer. Sometimes when the desired spirit came, it gave its name with a difference, inserting perhaps a second Christian name, where there ought not to be any. A studious person known to me, of highly nervous temperament and delicate health, was readily attended by several spirits, which readily answered for some time, and then became obstinately silent. At a subsequent visit, they came to him again, and entered into conversation. They were then asked why they had stopped short in their communications on the former occasion; to which an answer was given: "Because we feared to excite him." Many particulars of this kind could be told, curious on an assumption, of the verity of the pretended phenomena; but in the opposite assumption, only interpretable as tricks or caprices of the Medium. The table has moved in Mrs Hayden's presence, both in her own lodging, and in the houses which she has visited; but it has not been my fortune to see any phenomena of that kind in her case, excepting a very slight movement of a circular kind, such as could be easily produced by a person sitting beside the table, and using either foot or knee for the purpose.

'I next visited, at a respectable lodging in Devonshire Street, Mrs Roberts, a second American Medium, who has come very recently to this country, in order to "gratify serious and enlightened minds" with "spiritual communications from departed friends." She is an older lady than Mrs Hayden, tall, and of solemn aspect. Her husband, a native of the north of Ireland, is likewise a tall and serious-looking person. They profess to belong to the Episcopal Church, and have all the appearance of being under deep religious convictions. I visited this couple, in company with two ladies—one of them a person of rank; the other, a clever literary woman, who is fully convinced of the verity of the spiritual manifestations. We found a school Bible and prayer-book, with a slate and pencil, lying on the table, round which we proceeded to form a circle. Here, differently from Mrs Hayden's practice, the husband bears an essential part in the operations. I may mention, that the table was an ordinary round one of rosewood, having a pillar resting on a triangular foot, and Mr and Mrs Roberts sat together at a point in the circumference, between two of the resting-points. Laying their palms flat down on the table, the little finger of the gentleman's right hand overlapping that of the lady's left, they engaged in silent prayer for a few minutes. After some invocations and inquiries, a spirit came and manifested itself, not by rapping on the table, as in so many other cases, but by canting it slightly down on the side where the Medium and her husband sat. One tilt, we were informed, indicated a decided negative; a tilt followed by one slighter movement, implied doubt, or inability to answer the question; and a tilt

followed by two slighter movements, was an affirmative. There being no alphabet used here, one can get only yes or no to questions put, unless the spirit shall move some one to write upon the slate. Mr Roberts inquired of the spirit: "If it wished that a part of Scripture should be read;" to which an affirmative answer was given. "In the Old Testament or New?"—The New. "In Matthew—Mark—Luke, &c.?"—In Revelations. "In which chapter—the first—second, &c.?"—The tenth. "Shall it be read by the lady on the right?"—No. "By her on the left?"—No. "By the gentleman?"—Yes. I then read this chapter slowly, to allow of the spirit making signs at particular passages. At the passage: "Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not," there was a tilting of the table; as, likewise, at three or four other passages in the chapter. This was not felt as very satisfactory in any way; so one of the ladies proceeded, of her own accord, to ask questions on religious matters. She inquired if the Bible contained nothing but what was true; if the creed of the Church of England was a near approximation to the truth; if the Romish Church was true; in what sense, we were to understand that Christ was the Son of God; if those who had an imperfect belief would suffer on that account hereafter; and so forth. It may be enough to say, that the answers indicated a reliance on what is called orthodox doctrine, yet with a liberal allowance to dissenters, and very mild views as to future punishments. One might have conceived a Universalist to be speaking. The answer given to the inquiry regarding the Romish Church was an unusually deep cant of the table, causing it to fall back with a most emphatic negative. The spirit was then asked: "If thanksgiving was the most valuable part of prayer?"—Yes. "Are petitions for special benefits to ourselves of any avail?"—No. It was remarked by one of the ladies present, that the views on religious subjects drawn forth at the séances of another Medium were of a different tendency, and there was therefore reason to suspect that the intelligence procured was, in a great measure, subjective—that is, tinged with the convictions of the Medium, or, perhaps, of the inquirer. Mrs Roberts did not appear to have considered this point, and when it was explained to her, both she and her husband expressed a strong belief to the contrary. The question being put to the spirit, a negative was given; but when a further interrogative was put: "Is the response affected by particular opinions on the part of the spirit?" the answer was a hearty affirmative. Mr Roberts made several attempts to procure an impulse for written revelations on the slate through his own hand; but to no good result. He shewed us, however, a copy-book which a late visitor had written out, at the dictation or direction of a spirit professing to be Percy Bysshe Shelley, and containing many sentences of a pious sentimental character.

'Within the last fortnight (I am writing on the 23d of April) a third professor of spiritual communications had commenced advertising in the *Times*; and in this case the Medium was announced as a native of our own country. On a rainy, foggy, dreary evening, at seven o'clock, I was at the door of No. 37 Somerset Street, Portman Square, bent on supping full of whatever wonders might be in store for me. Let me here state, that I attended all of these séances in a state of mind, as I believed, neither sceptical nor credulous. Having chiefly in view to describe the externals of the scene, I deemed it best to let things go on in their own way, sufficiently complaisant towards the phenomena to put them in no risk of being marred or interrupted, and yet cool enough to detect any trick of a gross nature. The scene of which I quickly found myself a part, was of a homelier character than those at the residences of either of the two other Mediums. The leading person in the group is apparently a medical

man. The Medium is a young woman of sickly but intelligent appearance. The doctor, as I may call him, had much to tell me regarding his studies in clairvoyance, and, latterly, in spiritual communications, in all of which proceedings, he assured me, his leading aim is to do good to his fellow-creatures, not merely in regard to their health, but in promoting their soul-welfare. He has a particular regard to the cure of that class of mental disorders which were in ancient times ascribed to demoniac possession, himself reverting to this doctrine, and fully believing in it. He has at present residing with him a young man named Julius, whom he is endeavouring to cure of such a disorder, and who, he thinks, is making fair progress towards recovery.

'We four sat down at a small but solid round three-footed table, and were speedily joined by a fifth individual, a gentleman who seemed to be familiar with the family. Proceedings were commenced by the singing of a hymn on the power of God. We five persons then placed our hands on the table, and the doctor entreated that his kind spirit friends would please to manifest themselves. In a few minutes the table began to stir and tilt up in one direction—namely, towards Julius. It afterwards tilted in the other two directions, in obedience to requests to that effect. The young woman then took paper and a pencil, and prepared to write as the spirit might dictate. At the request of the doctor, I put a question mentally; and in a brief space, the Medium began to write in an abstracted manner, and without looking on the paper, as if yielding to some power external to herself. In a very scrawling hand she wrote as follows:—"I told you before, I do not like a mental question. Ask it aloud. W. W." This signature was held to imply that the spirit was that of the doctor's grandfather. I then, at his suggestion, put the question aloud, in something like the following terms:—"The spirits at Mrs Hayden's give a different view of religious matters from those at Mrs Roberts's. Which are we to understand to be true?" The answer was: "I am a spirit sent by the God of love to impart the knowledge given me for men, for their good. I say, we be to those in the latter day, who believe in those people named Haydens! They are not words and responses from God, but from the devil. They are false and wicked spirits who respond at Mrs Hayden's. At Mrs Roberts's they are very good spirits. Their idea of religion is true, for it is the religion of Christ; but although their religion is right, yet they are not as they ought to be. They are hourly offending their God, and, as we have before said, they will be punished, and all power taken from them, unless they alter, and are more careful of the way they treat this blessing sent from God for the good and instruction of mankind." The Medium professed to know nothing of the sense of what she had written, till it was read over to her. It may also be mentioned, that the writing was stated to be different from her ordinary hand, each spirit causing her to write differently from another; in this instance, it was so sprawling a hand, that the above response occupied nine pages of the size of a child's copy-book.

'Led by the style of conversation which prevailed in the company, I afterwards asked: "If the views and feelings which I entertained regarding God were such as the spirits could approve?" to which an affirmative answer was given. I further inquired: "If any spirits attended me in my ordinary course of life?"—Yes. The doctor explaining that everybody was attended by two, a good and a bad, and acted well or ill as the good or bad spirit was allowed to gain the ascendancy. To my inquiry: "If my good spirit had in general the greatest influence over me?" an affirmative answer was returned by three loud thumps of the table on the floor. I inquired if the evil spirit had also some influence; when three gentler thumps were given. I then expressed a

wish to see the table moved along the room, in the manner in which a lady of my acquaintance had lately seen it moved in America. The doctor having put the request, the table presently moved along in the direction of Julius, who had to rise in order to allow it way. As he moved back, with only the tips of his fingers laid upon it, it followed till it had gone about four feet from its former position, and of course was completely clear of the rest of the company. All this was well calculated to surprise for the moment; but although the dynamics of the case were at first a mystery to me, I became convinced afterwards, that, whether drawn along by the youth's fingers or not, it was possible to cause such a table to move under a very much slighter contact of the fingers than any one could have been prepared for; therefore, I came to attach no consequence to this section of the alleged phenomena. Most undoubtedly I saw the table sliding along, clear of every contact but that of the young man's finger-ends. He then came round to the other side, and, merely touching it, caused it to follow him back to its original place. Finally, the doctor requested us all to resume our seats, and place our hands upon the table; after which, in a formal and reverential tone, he returned his thanks to the spirits for the communications they had vouchsafed to the company that evening.

'In my conversations with the doctor, I learned that he entertains a more exalted view of the Spirit Manifestations than either of the other Mediums. Professing to see them entirely in a religious light, he refuses to be concerned in degrading them to the gratification of vulgar curiosity, as they are in his opinion when people ask how many children they have, what is their mother's name, and so forth. "I won't have this wonderful thing used as a toy," says he. "It seems to be the appointed means of bringing great spiritual blessings to mankind, and to that purpose I would confine it." When I asked, however, how he could account for such elevated beings as spirits condescending to such homely proceedings as rappings, table-tippings, and table-movements, he frankly confessed that that was beyond his power. On the whole, the doctor appeared to me an innocent enthusiast. He shewed sheafs of manuscript containing the results of his spiritual consultations, with a preface in highly poetical prose, which the Medium had written a few days ago under the inspiration of one of the spirits.

'Such is, I trust, a candid account of the Spirit Manifestations, so far as yet introduced into London. It now remains that we should speak of the principal theories which have been formed, on natural grounds intelligible to us, for the explanation of the so-called mystery. In the first place, your own hint that dollars are at the bottom of it all will scarcely bear handling, since it is perfectly certain that spiritual manifestations form an evening recreation in numberless private families in America, where money is not at all concerned. A lady sitting by my side, who left Boston less than a month ago, assures me she has been present at several séances in private circles, where the individuals were known to her as of the highest ranks in society in that city. This idea, therefore, may be set aside. Then, as to the *mécanique* of the sounds, we have had a hypothesis suggesting their depending on some operation with the foot, for which a very strong fire was necessary in the room. But at all the meetings where I was present, the temperature of the room was ordinary, and I must profess a difficulty in believing that sounds which so plainly appear to proceed from the board of the table, and which one will at one moment hear at one part of that surface, and another time at another, can be produced by the foot at all. Moreover, a trustworthy friend has been present at Mrs Hayden's, when eight different sets of sounds were going on at one time in different parts, not merely of the table, but of the room. Therefore, if ordinary mechanical means are employed

for this part of the alleged imposture, they must be of a much more profound and complicated kind than have yet been surmised.

With regard to the alphabet-oracle, I have already mentioned the theory which occurred to my own mind after my first visit to Mrs Hayden. I felt not the slightest doubt that the experimenter, in that case, unconsciously gave significations on arriving at the proper letters. Though I could recollect no such acts on my own part in the communication with my brother's spirit, I could not be assured that I had not in this manner betrayed the date of his death, as well as his father's Christian name, while the mistakes regarding his own and his mother's might be assumed as caused by a misapprehension of certain pauses or other accidental movements on my touching certain wrong letters. It was, I must own, a hard supposition to form regarding a lady whom I had met under sanction of the courtesies of society, and whose husband was by profession my equal; but it required little reflection on the singular nature of the thing held out to observation, to assure me that Mrs Hayden must have made up her mind to encounter scepticism and all its consequences. I speedily heard of circumstances lending great support to the theory. A clever journalist, for instance, found that he could, by such significant pauses and movements, bring out any response he pleased, even including one to the effect that the ghost of Hamlet's father had seventeen noses, and another, affirming that Mrs Hayden was an impostor. A friend of my own, a scientific man of high reputation, inquiring who was the first man, did in the same way lead to the answer, "Brian Boru," this person being in reality an Irish hero of the eleventh century. On the other hand, the believers allege that, where such tricks are attempted, tricks are played off by the spirits in return, so that it is hopeless to realise the test which is sought for—a view to which we may, of course, attach what importance we please. I am at least satisfied, that the assumption of proof of imposture through this means is premature, for I have seen the alphabet used successfully behind the Medium's back, where only visitors were present; and I am assured that this is often done with precisely the same effect as when the alphabet is displayed on the table.

Perhaps the most startling of all the alleged facts is that of the table-movement, seeing that it is perfectly tangible, or apprehensible by the ordinary senses. I may remark, that, for my own part, I never felt greatly perplexed about these phenomena, till I saw the table in Somerset Street moving slowly along a floor without any visible force. The impression, indeed, was but momentary, for we are too well aware of what wonderful things may be done through occult means by such gentlemen as Messieurs Anderson, Robin, and Houdin, to suppose it improbable that some natural dynamics were employed in the case. Still, the thing is highly curious and striking. It seems the more remarkable, when we learn that it takes place in many of the private circles across the Atlantic. We have there the additional difficulty of accounting for an imposture so extensively practised among persons of importance in society, and practised so long without any of the practitioners yielding to the temptation of telling all, and getting a laugh at the many dupes. While I write, an article from the *Augsburg Gazette*, of 30th March, reaches me, giving an account of the introduction of the table-moving phenomenon in private circles at Bremen. Thence it quickly proceeded to Vienna, where, according to a correspondent of the *Times*,* it was immediately in great vogue. It is also introduced into Berlin, Dresden, and Munich; in short, a few weeks have been sufficient to see Germany laid completely open to this marvel, while in England,

months have passed without seeing it go beyond a few private circles.

In the brief space left, it is difficult to convey the hypothesis I have formed regarding these strange demonstrations. I can give my views only in a very condensed form. The greater number of the persons concerned are, in my opinion, credulous people, visionaries and enthusiasts, who first impose upon themselves, and then upon others. Were they impostors in full consciousness of imposition, as some assert, their tricks would have been exposed long ere now in a hundred quarters. The Spirit Manifestations are rather to be explained as resembling one of the manias of the middle ages. The thing rests primarily on philanthropic and religious zeal; secondly, on mere love of the wonderful; but what I hold to be above all essential to it, is a view to some good ultimate result beyond the gratification of vulgar curiosity. The practitioners all start with a belief that such manifestations are possible, and do continually take place in the presence of properly-qualified persons. In their own trials, they help the effects—that is, produce them; thinking no evil, since these effects would otherwise come of themselves; or perhaps hardly conscious of their doing that which they only expect to see done; but anyhow, fully disposed to stretch a point for the sake of the end in view, whether that be directly to convince others of there being a spiritual world always around us, or merely to obtain countenance for their own convictions.

There must also be cases where a deliberate trick is practised; but I believe these to be rare. Now, it must be admitted that there are some difficulties regarding certain phenomena; as, for example, the alphabet-reading out of sight of the Medium. But when I consider how much help the complaisant experimenter is capable of giving unconsciously to the Medium, I think we may regard this problem as not quite irresolvable in consonance with our hypothesis. The direct and downright people, who say the whole is rank imposture, will be unable to appreciate the analytical view I take; but those who have studied the profound deceitfulness of the human heart, and seen how shadowy are the divisions between self-delusion and active deluding, will find less difficulty in the case. And it surely cannot appear to any as very strange, that a visionary female, who thinks that a spirit writes with her hand, is also convinced that the same spirit is guiding her hand when she uses its force to depress a table on one side or cant it up on another. With such an impression on her mind, the idea of deception will never once occur to her. The *mécanique* of the rapping phenomena is not yet explained in consonance with this hypothesis; but I wait in full confidence that it soon will be so. A. R.

THE HERRING—NATURAL AND ECONOMICAL.

Then up jumped the Herring, the king of the sea,
Crying: 'Raise your head-sheets, clasp your helm a-lee;
For it's stormy weather, stormy weather;
When the ship sinks, we'll be all together.'

Old Sea-song.

THE herring is the head of a large family-group of fishes whose natural affinities have been long recognised, and whose vast numbers, regular periods of migration, facility of capture, and wholesomeness as food, render them of greater importance to mankind than all the rest of the finny race put together. Who dare say that this truly royal fish is not well designated, in old proverbial *parlance*, by the high-sounding appellation—King of the Sea? What monarch, we should like to know, be he king or kayser, has created more maritime nations, raised more fleets, trained more seamen, caused more treaties to be negotiated, more diplomatic mysti-

* *Times*, April 20, 1853.