

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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ON LIFE AFTER DEATH

BY

GUSTAV THEODOR FECHNER

TRANSLATED BY

DR. HUGO WERNEKKE

Head Master of the Realgymnasium at Weimar.

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Gustav Theodor Fechner was a professor of physics, but he took great interest in psychology and by combining the two sciences became one of the founders of the science of "psychophysics," based upon the obvious interrelation between sensation and nerve-activity. While he did much creditable work in the line of exact psychology, he devoted himself with preference to those problems of the soul which touch upon its religious and moral life and its fate after death. His little book *On Life After Death* is his most important publication in this line.

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THE JAPANESE MAN WITH THE HOE.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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MEDIUMISTIC SEANCES.

CORRESPONDENCE WITH AN INQUIRER.

BY DAVID P. ABBOTT.

LETTER TO MR. ABBOTT.

DEAR SIR:

I had the pleasure, some time ago, of reading an article of yours in *The Open Court* on "Mediumistic Phenomena." Of the following which I submit to you, I feel that I will be satisfied with the explanations you may make. I am not a spiritualist, but while visiting some friends in Kansas City, recently, who *are* spiritualists, I was invited to attend a "trumpet" seance given at a private house. Out of curiosity I attended. The seance was held in an unfurnished back room up stairs. All the room contained was a row of chairs around the wall. In the center on the floor was a small rug on which stood a large trumpet and some flowers. A lady clairvoyant from Topeka conducted the seance. In the circle were believers and unbelievers. We were seated around the room with feet touching. Lights were put out and we were in black darkness. They said the medium was controlled by an Irish spirit. Presently the Irish spirit spoke through the trumpet giving us a welcome greeting. After this each one in turn was spoken to by supposed dead relatives.

When it came to my turn, a sister who has been dead many years spoke her name and talked to me. (No one in the circle knew anything about me except a sister-in-law who was with me.) I had not been thinking of this sister, but of others whom it might be possible would appear, and my sister-in-law said, *she* had not. I have no faith in it all, but would like your explanation, if you will be kind enough to favor me with it. I would like you to ex-

plain another thing. My sister-in-law told me she had seen her husband, who died about a year ago. She said she saw him as plainly as she ever did in life; that he came through the front door, went right up to her, spoke a few words and disappeared. This she declares to be true.

I will tell you of another instance. A daughter of the sister-in-law of whom I have spoken, when quite a little girl, saw my mother who had died some time before. She went up-stairs and in one of the rooms she saw my mother sitting in a rocking-chair. She ran screaming down-stairs, almost frightened to death. At another time she saw her standing by the stove in the room. This all seems very strange to me, but I have no reason to doubt their word.

Very respectfully,

.....

REPLY.

DEAR MADAM:

Your letter is received. It is hard to explain something some one else has seen; when, to do so correctly, one should have been present to personally observe all the little details, for trickery.

I will say that no one would be more happy than I were it possible to prove personal immortality in this manner; yet I do not wish to be deceived and to believe that which is not true. Therefore, I always look for fraud or trickery in manifestations of this nature. I will further add that all my life I have been looking for things of this kind, and have never yet been able to see one little thing that was genuine. Always, when I have been present, I have found a trick.

I have attended but one "Trumpet Seance," which was some eight or ten years ago in Lincoln, Nebr. This was given at the home of a lady where the medium stopped; and as the family was poor, the lady was glad to have the medium's seances a success, so that she might receive the proper financial remuneration for his board.

The room was bare of furniture, and the guests were seated around the room on chairs holding each other's hands. The medium sat in this circle, and the trumpet stood in the center of the circle.

As soon as the lights were out the trumpet apparently floated into the air, and from its mouth we were greeted by an "Irish Spirit." This spirit attempted to be a comedian; but his brogue was unnatural, and his wit was so poor that I felt ashamed for the

medium. It, however, seemed to satisfy the majority of the sitters, who appeared to be possessed of only very ordinary mental powers.

Tests were given to various persons present; but as no one present knew anything about me, I, of course, received no test.

I was satisfied that the medium held the trumpet to his mouth and did the talking. I knew that by pointing it rapidly in different directions, the voice would appear to come from the various positions occupied by the bell of the trumpet; and the spirit would thus appear to change places rapidly over our heads.

I felt certain that the persons sitting on each side of the medium were his confederates, and that they held the hands of the ones next to them; but, of course, released the medium's hands so that he could handle the trumpet.

I was inclined to think that there were a goodly number of confederates in the circle, who probably shared in the proceeds of the seance; for I found the persons next to me would not let my hands loose for even an instant. I felt sure that confederates took possession of all strangers, and saw to it that their hands were not released; and thus they prevented accidents.

To me it seemed merely a very cheap and poor trick. I have never fancied any trick where the lights had to be put out. It requires too little skill to perform such tricks. I have always felt that if the spirits of the departed could return to us mortals, they would not require a tin horn to talk through, and the entire absence of light-waves in the room. To me this all savors too much of charlatanism, and that of the cheapest kind.

Some time after I attended this seance, I had some financial dealings with the daughter of the lady at whose home this medium had boarded. I told the daughter what I had concluded in regard to the matter, and she confessed that I was right in every particular. I thus verified all my suspicions in the case. This lady told me that there was money in this business and that she intended going into the profession. This she did soon thereafter, advertising as a clairvoyant and trance medium. I understand that she has become quite successful in the business.

There is one statement in your letter that is entitled to considerable more consideration than ordinary work of this kind. This is the statement of the appearance of your dead sister's voice, when no one in the room knew of this sister except your sister-in-law who was with you. In regard to this I cannot say positively how the medium obtained the necessary information in your particular case; but I do know the methods employed in securing such information

by nearly all the first-class professional mediums who are traveling over the country.

Each medium keeps a record of all information obtained in a book for that purpose. All questions asked by any persons at any of the seances, are catalogued alphabetically in this book under the names of the persons asking them. Also the medium catalogues alphabetically any other information he may be able to obtain about any of the persons who attend spiritualist meetings. When visiting with the members and gossiping the medium quietly "pumps" each person about other members. As soon as the medium is alone all this information is catalogued in this book. Children are questioned adroitly about their own relatives, and about those of their neighbors and friends; and all this is added to the store of information.

Graveyards are visited and the secrets of the tombs catalogued. Also, the old files of the daily papers are searched for information relating to deaths and marriages; and, by all these ways, in time the book contains many tests of value to a medium. When this medium leaves town, the book (or a copy) is passed on to the next medium, who enters town equipped with all the information previously gathered. Professional mediums are generally pretty well known to each other, although for obvious reasons they pretend not to be.

Some of the better grade of mediums have an advance person, who, in the guise of an agent of some kind, visits the proper families. During the time he is in each home, he asks for a drink of water; and while the lady is getting it, he studies the family Bible and the album, or questions the children about such matters as will be of use to the medium who will soon follow. In all of these manners much information is secured in the course of time. It is not unusual for a good medium to enter town with over a hundred good tests for the citizens there.

In addition to the above there are certain members of each spiritualistic community who make a business of acting as confederates for mediums. They usually receive pay for their services. You would be surprised were you once behind the scenes, and a performer, to know how many apparently respectable persons at a seance are secretly confederates of the medium. These confederates make it their business to learn all they can of the family history of their neighbors, or of any friends or relatives visiting their neighbors; which information is at once conveyed to the medium, and the same properly catalogued.

You would think that respectable persons would not take part in fraud in such matters; but they get into it gradually, and really

come to enjoy it. I am personally acquainted with a certain sleight-of-hand performer in this city, who has for years served as a confederate for most of the mediums visiting this place. He tells me that he enjoyed it at first, but being so well versed in tricks, his services were of so much value to mediums that they were after him to help them out continually. This required so much of his time that he has of late entirely given up this work and now refuses to attend seances at all.

In addition to these methods of obtaining information, most members are so anxious to see some one converted, that what information they possess is not guarded from the medium very closely. In fact, they seem in many cases to be trying to help the medium out. They are all so anxious to see their medium succeed; and are very quick to feel proud of him, when such tests are given.

There can be little doubt but that the information about your dead sister was obtained in some of these manners from your sister-in-law or her family, especially if she has children. No doubt some confederate has heard her mention your dead sister's name, in some time past. This may have escaped your relative's memory. Or, if she is a believer, she has undoubtedly attended other seances, and asked questions, usually written ones. If so, the mediums may have been in possession of the proper information for some considerable time.

I feel certain that this information was gained in some such manner; and while you may doubt this explanation, I feel that were I to go there and begin operating as a medium, the confederates would soon make themselves known to me; and that I could quickly learn where the medium got her information in your case.

You thought you were a stranger; but you may rest assured that you were known as soon as you entered the room, and that a test was planned for you that would make a sensation. And they probably hoped also to make a convert.

It is probable that your dead sister bore the same relation to your sister-in-law that you do. If this be the case, and she being dead, your sister-in-law would have been almost certain at some meeting some time, to have asked some question, which, within its lines, conveyed the information that there was such a person then dead.

It is a great advantage to mediums to be able to give tests of this character; the effect being so great on those present and so convincing, it adds greatly to the medium's reputation, as well as to his finances, to be able to give such tests. As a result, a medium

is always on the lookout for such information; and makes securing it his principal employment when not engaged at the regular work. You may rest assured that a medium will not hesitate to use such information in the manner you have outlined, no matter how he may have come into possession of it.

Frequently, when such tests are given, the ones receiving them are so taken by surprise and so greatly impressed, owing to their affection for the departed and their longing to feel that the departed still exists as an individual or unit, that they imagine afterwards that they noticed a resemblance in the voice, to that of their dear one. I do not know whether or not you noticed such a resemblance to your sister's voice.

There are dealers who sell to mediums secrets which give them instructions for performing their work. I have bought many such secrets myself, paying a large price for them; and I can assure you that I know what I am talking about in this instance.

The fact that dealers in such secrets can follow the business successfully, is proof that they receive sufficient patronage to support it, and this patronage comes almost entirely from professional mediums.

I could recall to you many instances of fraudulent mediums, had I time and space to do so. I hope at a future time to publish in *The Open Court* another article, describing the work of some of the best mediums. If ever you come to Omaha, I should be pleased to make your acquaintance; and would personally illustrate to you what may be accomplished by trickery in this field.

As to the apparitions which your sister-in-law and her daughter claim to have seen, there are but three solutions possible.

First: There is the solution that the statement is not true; but as you assure me you have every confidence in their truth, I will not consider this solution.

Second and Third: We have the solutions either that they did see what they claim to have seen objectively; or that they imagine that they did, but really saw it subjectively. There is no professional medium at work here, and consequently no trickery to explain.

If the doctrine of scientific men (as for instance set forth in Dr. Carus's *Soul of Man*) be correct, each object viewed throughout life leaves an impression in our brain-structures. When such object is first viewed, the form of the outside motions of the ether (light-waves) is transferred to the proper position within the brain by the mechanism of the nervous system. Here this produces a commotion

and as a result this commotion leaves a "trace" which is preserved in the brain structure.

When such trace is being formed, the subject experiences subjectively a sensation which he identifies with the outside object producing it. The fact is the formal features of the outside object have been transferred to, or reproduced in, the sensation. When next the same object is viewed, the same nerve energy passes along the same channels into the same trace and stimulates or excites it again as was done in the first instance. During this process the subject again experiences the same sensation as was experienced in the first instance. The subject recognizes the sensation to be the same as the first one experienced, and naturally attributes it to the same outside cause.

If, now, this particular trace in the brain structure be artificially excited or stimulated by any means, the subject will experience the original sensation, and will perceive the object that originally formed such a trace. The perception will be just as real to the subject as was the original perception, or as it would be if the exciting cause were the original object outside. The original object could not produce a perception more real to the subject, because it could only excite or stimulate the same trace in the same manner; and the subject would have no means to distinguish between two identical impressions, although produced by different causes.

It is due to such local excitements and stimulations that we see objects in our sleep, just as real as if they existed objectively in the positions in which our perceptions picture them.

Now, if, from any cause, a highly-strung, sensitive, or nervous person, stimulate or excite any particular trace in the brain structure, he will see subjectively but as perfectly real, the original object that formed this trace. Such person is most liable to excite in this way that portion of the brain wherein is the image of some dear one on whom the mind has been dwelling too intently; and which has thus been overworked, so that the mechanism of this particular part of the sentient substance has been weakened and impaired.

If we conclude that your relatives really saw these dead persons objectively, this can only mean that these dead persons were really present in this room. Now, if they were clothed as in life, we must also conclude that the clothing of persons as well as their spiritual part, is immortal. As Ingersol said, we must conclude that clothing has ghosts. But if we accept the theory of a mere subjective apparition or illusion, caused by a local excitement in the

brain structures, we should naturally expect the images to be clothed as in life.

The question is, which do you regard as most probable: that your relatives really saw the spiritual part of two beings objectively—that is, the part that is not material, and that it had this material appearance—or that they saw a mere subjective apparition within their own brains? I should prefer the subjective theory.

I remain, dear madam, yours for truth,

DAVID P. ABBOTT.

ANOTHER LETTER OF MR. ABBOTT.

DEAR MADAM:

Since writing my former letter, it has been my good fortune to come into possession of a little information that might interest you; accordingly, I write you this second letter.

There recently arrived in Omaha two "Celebrated Occultists." They hired a hall and some parlors, and began a series of public meetings, seances, and private readings. They had considerable difficulty in securing rooms, as the property owners were afraid of the reputation their property might acquire of being "haunted." Finally the papers came out with quite a sympathetic article in their behalf, with the result that they have started off very prosperously. There is an attendance of three or four hundred persons at their Sunday night meetings, while they have from thirty to forty at the parlor seances; and during the day they are continually employed giving private readings.

I called on these mediums, and was surprised to find that the principal medium was the lady I formerly knew in Lincoln, Neb., to whom I referred in my former letter. She has been regularly in the profession for the past nine or ten years, has a good acquaintance with all the professional mediums, and comes here direct from Kansas City, Mo.

She recognized me at once, and seems to intend making a convert of me. She has evidently forgotten the little confession she made to me just before entering the profession.

I had several little confidential visits with her manager, and incidentally mentioned to him the name of a certain dealer in secrets for the use of mediums, stating that I was familiar with most of the effects of the kind, and was a performer of them. This seemed to "break the ice," and he was ready enough to give me any

information he possessed about other mediums; at the same time claiming that his medium was, of course, genuine.

I find that the lady who gave the seance you wrote me about is an acquaintance of theirs. They know her well, and her name is Miss —.

You will know if this be right and if my information be correct. He assured me that her mediumship is fraudulent, and informed me that she has an artificial hand which she frequently uses in her "Trumpet Seances." This hand is attached to the person, and can be bent into different positions. When she sits with the subject next to her, she takes hold of the subject's two hands with her left hand, and, incidentally, does not let loose of them during the seance. This is done after the lights are out. Then she, with her remaining hand, bends down the artificial hand (which has been concealed in her clothing), so that its fingers clasp the arm of the sitter. The subject can then inform the spectators at all times that the medium has both hands on his person. Meanwhile, the medium's right hand is free to grasp the light aluminum trumpet, and point it into different positions while she talks through it. She also, on occasions, uses a telescopic reaching-rod which can be carried in the pocket; but when extended it reaches a length of several feet, and enables her to float the trumpet on its end around the room over the heads of the spectators, giving them an occasional "bump," while her voice can be heard in the position where she sits. This is done in the same manner that guitars and other instruments (frequently self-playing) are sometimes floated over the heads of a circle of sitters by many mediums. This is done while they apparently hold the hands of one of the spectators at their side of the circle.

I asked the manager how he considered that the medium got her information about your dead sister. He replied that she undoubtedly got it from what is known to certain members of the profession as the "Blue Book." This is the book I referred to before in which the tests are alphabetically catalogued for each town. He said that his medium never uses the "Blue Book" as her mediumship is genuine; but, however, he has in his possession a similar book of Kansas City. I asked if I could find the information about your dead sister in his book; but he said that possibly he did not have that particular item, although there could be no doubt but that it was contained in the book of the lady or of the noted medium Mr. —, as these two have worked together to a considerable extent.

There can be no doubt but that all the questions that your rela-

tive ever asked the mediums in any of the Kansas City meetings, have been preserved and catalogued; and thus the information about your dead sister may have been obtained for some considerable time. Although the medium was a stranger to you, it is quite certain that you were known to the medium when the seance began. This is part of their business, and the knowledge of a suitable number of "tests" is a medium's stock in trade.

I remain, dear madam,

Very truly yours,

DAVID P. ABBOTT.

INQUIRER'S REPLY TO MR. ABBOTT.

DEAR SIR:

Your communication which I have just received deserves an early reply.

The name of the medium who held the seance was —, the same as you mentioned. I was introduced to her but I never heard her given name. Of course, she must be the same one. I saw her and Mr. — at a Sunday evening meeting at their hall, so you are on the right track.

I do not see how any one can practice so much fraud in such serious matters.

Thanking you for your kindness,

I am very respectfully,

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