

MR. DAVID P. ABBOTT'S NEW ILLUSIONS OF THE SPIRIT WORLD.

BY THE EDITOR.

DAVID P. Abbott, known to our readers through many interesting explanations of the art of spirit mediums and of magic feats done by sleight of hand, is most certainly a genius in his hobby,—I say hobby because magic with him is not a profession but a recreation to which he devotes his leisure hours. I have never met him, but we have exchanged many letters about his work and his plans.

Some time ago he was interested in spirit portraiture as performed by certain spirit mediums who gained thereby both fame and wealth. It is whispered that they have become millionaires by producing portraits of the dead—and even of the living—painted mysteriously by invisible hands in the very presence of their patrons. The sitter would attend a seance holding in his hand between sealed slates a photograph of the person whose picture was desired, and if conditions were favorable he was invited to witness the appearance of the painting on a clean canvas which he had previously selected himself. The performance is most impressive and mystifying. It has been witnessed by many believers as well as unbelievers, among them some men of prominence. Think only of the feeling roused in people who see the portrait of their late beloved father or mother appear on a brightly lighted white canvas. There are but few who are not moved to tears. Indeed the effect is so marvelous that the performance is said to have made many converts to spiritism.

Mr. Abbott communicated to me many guesses which need not be enumerated here, for the explanations were too complicated to be satisfactory, and once Mr. Abbott added, "All good tricks are simple, otherwise they do not work." Finally, however, he solved the problem and sent me an explanation which accounted for all the

facts. There were only some minor points to be settled, the most important of which was the composition of the paints, but this detail could be supplied by any good chemist.

Considering the use that has been made of this ingenious trick in the interest of a belief in mediumship, we deem it desirable for the public to know that it is a trick; that these portraits are not painted by spirits but that the performance can be done very easily by any one who is familiar with sleight of hand tricks and has been initiated into the secret. Mr. Abbott has promised to communicate the explanation to the readers of *The Open Court*, but his time has not yet come, because the knowledge of such a performance involves considerable interests, and so we have kept the secret until Mr. Abbott would give us permission to make his discovery public.

We learn through our correspondence with Mr. Abbott that he has also communicated his secret to Professor Hyslop of the Psychological Research Society; Mr. Kellar, the famous prestidigitator; to Dr. A. N. Wilson, editor of *The Sphinx*; and to Dr. Wilmar (William Marriott) of England, who showed considerable interest in this trick. But they also are in honor bound not to betray Mr. Abbott's confidence.

Under the date of June 2, 1910, Mr. Abbott wrote me as follows: "During the week of June 12th the English conjurer Selbit will exhibit at some Chicago theater, 'Spirit Portraits.' A genuine committee places two clean canvases so that they face each other, and these are set on an easel in front of a light, and a chosen portrait is then materialized. I thought you would like to see how this thing looks, and so I take the liberty of giving you this information. The act is very beautiful, is shrouded in deep mystery and made a great hit on the Orpheum Circuit in the West. This was the discovery I made and told you about some time back. I sent it to Dr. Wilmar (William Marriott) of London, and he put it on the road. Mr. Selbit obtained the secret from Dr. Wilmar and has toured France and England with it."

Anent the publication of the secret Mr. Abbott added:

"I am sorry to say that my relations with Mr. Selbit are such that I can not expose this secret at present—that is, publicly but thought you might like to witness the thing."

I went to see the performance and must confess that I wished I could have forgotten for the moment what Mr. Abbott had written me, for the pleasure of sleight of hand lies mainly in the perplexity with which we are confronted when baffled by an apparent miracle and unable to produce an explanation. Nevertheless, in spite of

this fact, the performance was wonderful, for I could now understand how easily people could be duped and how believers in the miraculous can dare the skeptic to deny the supernatural.

It is a pity that the stage performance must lack the most important feature of the trick, which is its psychological aspect. Mediums play upon the tenderest feelings of their patrons, viz., the love and reverence of the living towards their departed relatives, and this most effective element is necessarily lacking in any public exhibition. Instead of portraits of the dead, famous paintings must be used.

When I witnessed the performance a committee from the audience selected a subject and from a number of clean canvasses two were picked out at random. They were placed on a heavy easel and marked. A strong electric light was turned on behind the frame on the easel and showed the canvas in its pure whiteness, the light shining directly through them and rendering them transparent. The exhibiter then placed between the light and the canvas his hand showing its shadow in sharp outline. There were no colors visible; but he withdrew his hand and lo! some hazy colors began to appear and became more and more distinct. They began to show the outlines of the picture chosen and finally the painting was perfect. No hand that might have done the work was visible.

"Is the painting good?" asks the performer, and some one replies: "Yes, indeed, but. . . ." and he criticises some detail; we will say that the red is too glaring or a blue effect too weak, or the read should be blue. "I think you are right," says the performer, "but that can be remedied."

Thereupon the picture disappears just as it came. The outlines grow dim and change into mere color spots finally to disappear in the original whiteness of a clean canvas. The committee on the stage walk round the easel but there is nothing to be seen but the electric light, and the picture is gone.

Now the picture appears again. There is nothing behind, nothing in front, but the front canvas becomes again covered with some hazy paint which gradually assumes the same clear and definite outlines as before, but this time the red and the blue are changed according to request.

When the picture is approved by the audience it is taken down and without exchange passed to the spectators for examination. The paints are then found to be that same mysterious spiritual substance that was said to defy the chemists of the "earth-plane." We are at liberty to state that the secret is no process of development from chemicals, light etc., as first supposed by Mr. Abbott;

neither is it any image, reflection, or lantern projection scheme etc.; that it is something entirely new, and based upon a principle hitherto unknown to the conjuring profession. Withal it is very simple, and easy to produce any portrait desired.

One spiritualist wrote to a man high in their organization that the stage-performance was unlike the work of the mediums because the latter made portraits of the dead while the conjurer only produced portraits of celebrities. He also said that any request for a portrait of a dead friend would be ignored. This is not the case. Should the conjurer produce for a large audience a portrait of any private person the effect would be lost as none of them would know whether it were a correct likeness or not, while they all instantly recognize a celebrity. Furthermore the conjurer can produce a likeness of one's dead if requested in advance just as the mediums do. In the case of mediums they know when they go into the seance whose portrait they are to produce, and if it is to duplicate a photograph in existence, invariably have from one to three days notice.

The conjurer is not notified what portrait he is to produce until the chosen canvases are marked, faced together, placed on easel and light switched on. A medium would not produce the likeness of a dead friend of a sitter if not notified until after the canvases were placed in a window and the seance had begun.

Furthermore the conjurer Selbit actually produced for a lady in Portland the likeness of her grandmother who had died thirty-five years ago in Germany. There was no photograph in existence, but the lady recognized her grandmother. It is needless to say the request for such portrait was made in advance and that Selbit utilized his arts to obtain a fair description of the dead lady.

Mr. Abbott has also communicated his secret to Mr. Howard Thurston, known to the public not only as a prestidigitator but also as a pleasing speaker who while he baffles the audience with his magic surprises, entertains them at the same time with the eloquence of an orator. Mr. Thurston took so much interest in Mr. Abbott's act of magic portraiture that he staged it and now presents it to crowds of spectators in our great cities.

The honor of the invention, Mr. Abbott wrote to me, in his opinion belongs to the Bangs Sisters who are said to have used it effectively on many credulous and gullible people; he himself, he adds, claims only the rediscovery of the illusion which the Bangs Sisters have used as mediums.

What an effect this performance must have on a believer in spiritism, who deems it possible that invisible "Intelligence" can

work such miracles! And yet it is a trick, a very simple trick. Go yourself and try to explain it.

Mr. Abbott will in time publish the explanation, and he has some more surprises in store which will puzzle the world, and I dare say that the most remarkable of them is the spirit tea-kettle. This is an empty little kettle made of papier-maché, very light and easily handled by any one and carried about at pleasure. But it is inhabited by a spirit,—or if the reader does not believe in spirits, at least it is inhabited by a voice, a thin distant voice, such as spirits ought to have, if they existed; and this voice comes out from the interior of the tea-kettle. You have simply to ask a question and hold the spout of the tea-kettle close to your ear, and there you can hear the answer distinctly. You put your hand into the tea-kettle to catch the spirit, but there is nothing to grasp but the empty air, and the spirit laughs at your folly in trying to catch its incorporeal presence. The voice manifests intelligence in its answers and conversation and is unlike a phonograph which only reproduces a set speech. It remains there and gives rational answers to all questions proposed by the witnesses of the weird scene. There is no connection of any kind with the kettle, and no one but the spectator touches or comes near it. The writer of these lines knows that there is nothing supernatural about this uncanny performance.

There is a bottle preserved in one of the churches of the ancient Hansa town, the free city of Luebeck, which contains the soul of a medieval nun. Her body is shriveled up into pure nothingness, and all that is left of her mortal coil is her voice which, lest it be lost entirely, has been bottled up and in this condition deposited in the holy place. Should any one of my readers be curious enough to travel to Luebeck, I doubt very much whether the enchanted nun could be induced to speak. It is to be feared that the old spinster has grown too whimsical. Not so Mr. Abbott's spirit voice; it answers in audible and plain words; and it is no ventriloquism, for the performer may leave the room and the voice still comes from the spout of the tea-kettle. In his own home Mr. Abbott has introduced to this mysterious tea-kettle many of his friends who have gone away in wonder after the seance.

It would be desirable to render the performance accessible to large audiences, but this is necessarily unfeasible on account of the small size of the tea-kettle and the thinness of its spirit-voice, which could be heard only by a few spectators at a time. For the very reason that the voice is so definitely localized, the act is practicable only in parlor entertainments.