

***BECKLES
WILLSON***

A photograph of pumpkins and a lit candle in a dark, autumnal setting. The scene is dimly lit, with a single lit candle providing the primary light source. The pumpkins are surrounded by dry, brown leaves and twigs, creating a textured and somewhat eerie atmosphere. The overall color palette is dominated by dark browns, oranges, and reds, typical of a Halloween or autumn theme.

***OCCULTISM
AND COMMON-
SENSE***

***BECKLES
WILLSON***

A photograph of pumpkins and a lit candle in a dark, autumnal setting. The scene is dimly lit, with a single lit candle providing the primary light source, casting a warm glow on the pumpkins and the surrounding foliage. The pumpkins are of various sizes and colors, including a large orange one in the foreground and a smaller white one behind it. The background is filled with dark, tangled branches and leaves, creating a dense and somewhat mysterious atmosphere.

***OCCULTISM
AND COMMON-
SENSE***

Beckles Willson

Occultism and Common-Sense

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The following chapters, together with Professor Barrett's comment thereupon, which now figures as an Introduction, originally appeared in the columns of *The Westminster Gazette*.

INTRODUCTION

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By Professor W. F. Barrett, F.R.S.

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Those of us who took part in the foundation of the Society for Psychological Research were convinced from personal investigation and from the testimony of competent witnesses that, amidst much illusion and deception, there existed an important body of facts, hitherto unrecognised by science, which, if incontestably established, would be of supreme interest and importance.

It was hoped that by applying scientific methods to their systematic investigation these obscure phenomena might eventually be rescued from the disorderly mystery of ignorance; (but we recognised that this would be a work, not of one generation but of many.) Hence to preserve continuity of effort it was necessary to form a society, the aim of which should be, as we stated at the outset, to bring to bear on these obscure questions the same spirit of exact

and unimpassioned inquiry which has enabled science to solve so many problems once not less obscure nor less hotly debated. And such success as the society has achieved is in no small measure due to the wise counsel and ungrudging expenditure both of time and means which the late Professor Henry Sidgwick gave, and which Mrs Sidgwick continues to give, to all the details of its work.

Turning now to the author of the following pages, everyone must recognise the industry he has shown and the fairness of spirit he has endeavoured to maintain. With different groups of phenomena, the evidential value varies enormously. The testimony of honest and even careful witnesses requires to be received with caution, owing to the intrusion of two sources of error to which untrained observers are very liable. These are unconscious mal-observation and unintentional mis-description. I cannot here enter into the proof of this statement, but it is fully established. Oddly enough, not only a credulous observer but a cynical or ferocious sceptic is singularly prone to these errors when, for the first time, he is induced to investigate psychical phenomena which, in the pride of his superior intelligence, he has hitherto scorned. I could give some amusing illustrations of this within my own knowledge. For instance, a clever but critical friend who had frequently scoffed at the evidence for thought-transference published in the "Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research," one day seriously informed me he had been converted to a belief in thought-transference by some conclusive experiments he had witnessed. Upon inquiring where these experiments took place I found it was at a public

performance of a very inferior Zancig who was then touring through the provinces!

*Mr Beckles Willson frankly tells us that "the light heart and open mind" with which he set forth on his inquiry deserted him before he drew his labours to a close. For, entering upon the subject as a novice, he found himself unexpectedly confronted by the mass of evidence and the numerous and profoundly difficult problems which the *Psychical Society* have had to face. His conclusions are derived from a study of the available evidence, and this study has convinced him—as it has convinced, so far as I know, every other painstaking and honest inquirer—that no theories based on fraud, illusion, nor even on telepathy, are adequate to account for the whole of the phenomena he has reviewed. Contrary to his prepossessions, Mr Willson tells us that he has been led to the conclusion that the only satisfactory explanation of these phenomena is the action of discarnate human beings—that is to say, the *Spiritualistic hypothesis*.*

I can hardly suppose he means to apply this statement to more than the small residue of phenomena which he finds inexplicable on any other hypothesis. Assuming this restricted view to be meant, the question arises, Is the evidence on which it is based sufficiently abundant, trustworthy, and conclusive, to warrant such a far-reaching statement? Here we must turn from the author to ascertain what has been the conclusion arrived at by those who have given long years to a searching experimental investigation of these phenomena, and who have approached the subject in a scientific and judicial spirit. The most noteworthy

instance is the testimony of that shrewd and able investigator, the late Dr Hodgson. His patient and laborious inquiry into the trance phenomena of Mrs Piper ultimately led him to the conclusion arrived at by Mr Willson. Dr Hodgson's well-known exposure of Madame Blavatsky and other fraudulent mediums and his sane and cautious judgment render his opinion of great weight. Then, again, we find that this also was the conclusion to which Frederic Myers was gradually driven. And long prior to this it was the conclusion arrived at by that acute thinker, the late Professor de Morgan, and it is the conclusion strongly held by the great naturalist, Dr A. R. Wallace, and held also by several other eminent investigators I might name.

So momentous a conclusion, if capable of such complete verification as to be universally accepted by science, would obviously throw all other discoveries into the background. I say if capable of being verified by scientific methods, but, although the weight of opinion will, in my opinion, ultimately lead to a very wide acceptance of this conclusion, yet it seems to me highly probable that the experimental discovery of the survival of human personality after death will always elude conclusive scientific demonstration. This particular field of psychical investigation belongs to an order other than that with which science deals; and, this being so, it can never be adequately investigated with the limited faculties we now possess.

In any case, as I said in a letter published in The Times, so long ago as September 1876, before science is in a position to frame any satisfactory hypothesis of the so-called Spiritualistic phenomena, a number of antecedent

questions will have to be investigated and decided. Prominent among these, I urged more than thirty years ago, was the question whether ideas or information can be voluntarily or involuntarily transferred from one mind to another independently of the recognised organs of perception. Experiments I had then recently made led me to the conclusion that something new to science, which might provisionally be called thought-transference, now known in its wider aspect as telepathy, did really exist. This, if established, would, as I pointed out, unquestionably solve some of the so-called spirit communications which had so puzzled investigators. But the idea of thought-transference was at that time just as obnoxious to official science as Spiritualism. Mr Willson quotes the implacable disbelief, even in the possibility of telepathy, which that great man Helmholtz expressed to me. And it is amusing now to recall the fierce outcry aroused by the paper I read at the British Association meeting in 1876, when, after narrating certain apparently transcendental phenomena I had witnessed, I asked that a committee of scientific men should be appointed to investigate preliminary question of the possibility of thought-transference.^[1] It is true the evidence on behalf of telepathy has since become so abundant that now few deny its probability, but even telepathy has not yet taken its place among the recognised scientific verities. I hope this recognition will not be long delayed, but until it occurs it is almost as illegitimate to use telepathy, as some do so freely, for the foundation of their theories of transcendental phenomena as to use the spiritualistic hypothesis itself.

To those who have carefully studied the evidence there is, however, little doubt that telepathy does afford an adequate explanation of certain well-attested phenomena, such as phantasms of the living or dying person. And telepathy, which may now be considered as highly probable, leads on to the evidence for man's survival after death—to this I will return later on.

Then, again, recent investigations have established the fact that the range of human personality must be extended to include something more than our normal self-consciousness. Our Ego is not the simple unitary thing older psychologists taught, but a composite structure embracing a self that extends far beyond the limit of our conscious waking life. Just as experimental physics has shown that each pencil of sunlight embraces an almost endless succession of invisible rays as well as the visible radiation we perceive, so experimental psychology has shown that each human personality embraces an unconscious as well as a conscious self. Mr Myers, using Du Perl's conception of a threshold, has termed the former our subliminal self. And just as the invisible radiation of the sun can only be rendered perceptible by some agency outside our vision, so this subliminal self reveals itself only by some agency outside our own volition. The subliminal self not only contains the record of unheeded past impressions—a latent memory—but also has activities and faculties far transcending the range of our conscious self. In this it also resembles the invisible radiation of the sun, which is the main source of life and energy in this world.

Certainly the everyday processes of the development, nutrition, and repair of our body and brain, which go on automatically and unconsciously within us, are far beyond the powers of our conscious personality. All life shares with us this miraculous automatism. No chemist, with all his appliances, can turn breadstuff into brainstuff or hay into milk. Further, the subliminal self seems to have faculties which can be emancipated from the limitations of our ordinary life. Glimpses of this we get when the conscious self is in abeyance, as in sleep, hypnosis, and trance. Here and there we find certain individuals through whom this sub- or supra-liminal self manifests itself more freely than through others; they have been termed "mediums," a word, it is true, that suggests Browning's "Sludge." But, as scientific investigation has shown all mesmerists and dowsers are not charlatans, so it has shown all mediums are not rogues.

This extension of human faculty, revealing, as it does, more profoundly the mysterious depths of our being, enables us to explain many phenomena that have been attributed to discarnate human beings. The question arises, Does it explain all so-called Spiritualistic phenomena? In my opinion, and in that of others who have given more time to their critical investigation than I have, it does not. At present we have to grope our way, but the ground is being cleared, and the direction which the future explorer of these unknown regions has to take is becoming more evident.

Occultism and Common-Sense

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CHAPTER I

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SCIENCE'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE "SUPERNATURAL"

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When I first ventured into the wide and misty domain of Occultism, with a light heart I set forth and an open mind. My sole aim was to ascertain, as far as the means at the disposal of an ordinary man with little of the mystic in his composition would allow, what degree of probability attached to published phenomena, which the ordinary laws of Nature, as most of us understand them, could not satisfactorily explain.

At the threshold of my inquiry, one prominent and, as it seemed to me, disconcerting fact confronted me—namely, that although for a couple of generations "supernatural" manifestations had been promiscuously exhibited before the public, challenging full investigation and inviting belief; although almost every day the newspapers report some striking case of spirit apparition or materialisation, coincident dreams, clairvoyance, trance utterances, or possession, often seemingly well attested; yet in spite of all this testimony academic science continued to dispute the very basis of such phenomena. Any investigator must needs recognise here a very anomalous situation. On the one hand are, let us say, half-a-million people, often highly intelligent, cultured, sane people, firmly protesting that they have witnessed certain astonishing occult manifestations, and on

the other hand the Royal Society and the British Association, and other organised scientific bodies established for the investigation of truth, absolutely refusing to admit such evidence or to regard it seriously. Forty years ago Faraday, besought to give his opinion, in this wise wrote: "They who say they see these things are not competent witnesses of facts. It would be condescension on my part to pay any more attention to them." Faraday's attitude was that of Huxley, Spencer, Tyndall, and Agassiz. The first-named, however, rather gave away his prejudice by saying: "Supposing the phenomena to be genuine, they do not interest me." Tyndall's utterance also deserves to be recalled: "There are people amongst us who, it is alleged, can produce effects before which the discoveries of Newton pale. There are men of science who would sell all that they have, and give the proceeds to the poor, for a glimpse of phenomena which are mere trifles to the spiritualist." He added: "The world will have religion of some kind, even though it should fly for it to the intellectual whoredom of spiritualism." Spencer's words were: "I have settled the question in my own mind on à priori grounds." Professor Carpenter called spiritualism "a most mischievous epidemic delusion, comparable to the witchcraft delusion of the seventeenth century."

What, then, has happened to strengthen the case of the believers in ghosts, clairvoyance, thought-transference, sensory automatism, in, say, the last quarter of a century? What new evidence exists which would make the mid-Victorian scientific men reconsider their position? Suppose

Faraday and Huxley, Spencer and Tyndall, were alive to-day, would they see reason to alter their opinions?

I remember once—and I now give it as typical—overhearing a psychical experience. It was in a first-class compartment on a train coming from Wimbledon. One of my fellow-passengers, an intelligent, well-spoken man of about thirty-five, was relating to three friends the following extraordinary story. As nearly as I can recollect, I give the narrator's own words:—

"One week ago last Tuesday, at eleven o'clock at night, my wife, who had just retired to bed upstairs, called out to me: 'Arthur! Arthur!' in a tone of alarm. I sprang up and ran upstairs to see what was the matter. The servants had all gone to bed. 'Arthur,' said my wife, 'I've just seen mother,' and she began to cry. 'Why,' I said, 'your mother's at Scarborough.' 'I know,' she said; 'but she appeared before me just there' (pointing to the foot of the bed) 'two minutes ago as plainly as you do.' Well, the next morning there was a telegram on the breakfast-table: 'Mother, died at eleven last night.' Now, how do you account for it?"

There was silence for a full minute.

"A wonderful coincidence. Your wife's hallucination coincided with her mother's death!"

Another occupant of the carriage caught up the word:

"Yes, coincidence. A thing which mightn't happen once in a million years."

Nobody else ventured a remark. Yet they seemed unconvinced. There was no one to tell them—even I did not

know then—that these "coincidences" were constantly happening, every year, perhaps every month; that an intelligent body of men—the Society for Psychical Research—has made a census of such hallucinations, all apparently well attested; that newspapers devoted to occult matters constantly record these things; that volumes—monthly, weekly, almost—fairly pour from the press detailing, expounding, dissecting, elaborating such evidence; that the theory of coincidence has already been rejected by many men of the first rank of science; and that official science itself is reluctantly reconsidering its position in more than one direction.

Yet so slowly do the masses move in intellectual life, so tardily do truths, concerning not merely occult but physical and material investigation, percolate through to the workaday world, that the researches, the activities, the ascertained truths of students of psychical phenomena are as a closed book. Perhaps the attitude of apathy with which occult phenomena and occult science are regarded by the average man is not unnatural. To him all miracles that are not Scriptural and ancient and, as it were, institutional are highly improbable, if not impossible. All super-naturalism, he will tell you, is morbid. "There may be something in these things," he says, "but it is not proved. As for spiritualism, my belief is that mediums are impostors. Most of the spiritualists I have seen are 'cranks'—they are certainly dupes—and I have no doubt that if I interested myself in these matters I should end by becoming also a 'crank.'"

This I maintain is the position of the ordinarily educated normal man.

"The moment," wrote Lord Lytton, "one deals with things beyond our comprehension, and in which our own senses are appealed to and baffled, we revolt from the probable, as it appears to the senses of those who have not experienced what we have." Now, that is just what the candid inquirer must avoid throughout his inquiry. It is often difficult to resist employing supernormal hypotheses; but, until normal hypotheses are exhausted, the resistance must be made. On the other hand, it is well to bear in mind Mr Andrew Lang's timely remark, "there is a point at which the explanations of common-sense arouse scepticism."

At all events, not even the most materialistic man-in-the-music-hall, with two eyes in his head, can deny that the great wave of occultism, which twenty years ago seemed to be receding, is again returning with greater force and volume, submerging many of the old sceptical theories and wetting even the utterly callous and ignorant with its spray. It is not so long ago that the very fact of hypnotism was doubted—Mesmer was long regarded as a mere quack—but to-day the induced trance is universally credited. To hypnotism must the miracle of telepathy now be added? Has it really been ascertained, after a thousand experiments and beyond the possibility of error, that a mode of apprehension exists which has no connection with the five senses? For twenty-five years the members of the Society of Psychical Research have carried on their investigations of both sleeping and waking subjects, under every conceivable condition, and are at last fain to announce that such a mystic faculty does exist by which brain can communicate with brain without any known sensory agency.

As to the kind of "ghost" story recorded above, what an exact analogy it bears to the following, to be found in a recent volume of the "Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research!" The statement was received from a Madame Broussiloff, of St Petersburg:—

"On the 16th (28th) of February of this year, between nine and ten o'clock in the evening, I, the undersigned, was sitting in our drawing-room—the small one—facing the large drawing-room, which I could see in its entire length. My husband, his brother, with his wife, and my mother, were also sitting in the same room with me round a large round table. I was writing down my household accounts for the day, while the others were carrying on some gay conversation. Having accidentally raised my head and looked into the large drawing-room, I noticed, with astonishment, that a large grey shadow had passed from the door of the dining-room to that of the antechamber; and it came into my head that the figure I had seen bore a striking resemblance in stature to Colonel Ave-Meinander, an acquaintance of ours, who had lived in this very lodging for a long time. At the first moment, I wished to say at once that a ghost had just flashed before me, but stopped, as I was afraid of being laughed at by my husband's brother and his wife, and also of being scolded by my husband, who, in view of the excitement which I showed when such phenomena were taking place, tried to convince me that they were the fruits of my fancy. As I knew that Meinander was alive and well, and was commander of the Malorossüskey 40th Regiment of Dragoons, I did not say anything then;

but when I was going to bed I related to my mother what I had seen, and the next morning could not refrain from mentioning it to my husband.

"Our astonishment was extreme when, on the 18th of February (2nd of March), we learned Nicholas Ottovitch Ave-Meinander had actually died after a short illness on the 16th (28th) of February at nine o'clock in the evening, in the town of Strashovo, where his regiment is stationed.

"The above account is confirmed by the percipient's mother, Marie von Hagemeister, and by the husband, Colonel Alexis Alexeievitch Broussiloff. Both state solemnly that Colonel Meinander died at nine P.M. on the evening of 16th February (28th) at Stashovo, 1200 versts from St Petersburg."

To explain this phenomenon in the terms of telepathy, the grey shadow seen by Madame Broussiloff was not a ghost, not the "bodiless spirit in the likeness of a man," but "a waking dream projected from the brain of the seer under the impulse of the dying man's thought."

But telepathy itself requires consideration and explanation. Sir William Crookes has repeatedly given publicity to his theory of brain-waves and to a kindred conception of ether substance, along which intelligence can be transmitted at an almost incalculable rate of speed to virtually interminable distances.

That mind should effect mind in a new mode may mean no more than that brain can act upon brain by means of ethereal vibrations hitherto unsuspected. The power itself may be but a lingering vestige of our inheritance from

primeval times, a long-disused faculty "dragged from the dim lumber-room of a primitive consciousness, and galvanised into a belated and halting activity."

Or, on the other hand, may not such faculty be regarded not as vestigial, but as rudimentary? Telepathy, if we follow the gifted author of "Human Personality," is a promise for the future, not an idle inheritance from the past.

Our business now is, all mystic speculations apart, to consider the phenomena in the order in which, if not yet actually accepted, they would seem to evoke least opposition from the academic science of the day. What is the net result of the evidence for all classes of supernormal phenomena? That I shall endeavour to point out, as concisely and lucidly as I can, in the following chapters.

CHAPTER II

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THE HYPNOTIC STATE

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Not least of the wonders of modern psychical research is the discovery that nothing in all the phenomena is new—that under other names and by other races every sort of manifestation was familiar to the most remote peoples. This would certainly seem to meet the argument of the physicist—it is not necessary to refer again to Professor Tyndall's uncomplimentary phraseology—who declares that all this popular occultism is a product of the last generation or two. Take hypnotism. Hypnotism (or mesmerism) was formerly alleged to be an emanation from the body—an effluence of intense will-power. The belief in such an emanation is centuries old. "By the magic power of the will," wrote Paracelsus, "a person on this side of the ocean may make a person on the other side hear what is said on that side ... the ethereal body of a man may know what another man thinks at a distance of 100 miles or more." Twenty years ago this creed was laughed out of court by Huxley, Tyndall, and other leading men of science. To-day we are told by those who have witnessed the experiments of Charcot, Janet, and others that "the existence of an aura of spirit-force surrounding the body like an atmosphere, in some cases at all events, can be proved as a physical fact."

Whatever the explanation, whatever the definition of this miraculous agency, hypnotism is now universally accepted.