

DAY OF
CALIBURIA

THE
Catholic World

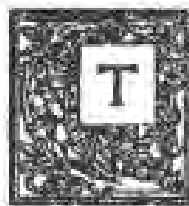
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SAINTS OR SPIRITS?

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THE great wave of Spiritism which is threatening the sanity of the world is based on a common, though by no means universal, desire to enter into some form of communion with the dead, to receive assurance of their survival, of their welfare, of the conservation of their human affections. There are men who do not feel this desire. There are men who love the light and who have no fear of the darkness; but to whom all borderlands are inexpressively repellant. David wept in the dust while his child lay dying, but bathed and dined when his child lay dead. The veil had fallen between them. "I shall go to him; but he shall not return to me." It is a clear-cut issue. Yet David's love for his sons was so strong that it dimmed his wisdom, and undermined his justice. It is in the mouth of Ulysses, whose affections were—to say the least—under admirable control, that Tennyson puts a sentiment so familiar to himself, a longing for the sight and sound of the dead:

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles whom we knew.

What provision has the Catholic Church made to rest the

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hearts which have suffered the pang of separation, what is the bridge she has built between the worlds of the living and the dead? The doctrine of the Communion of Saints, which in the Protestant churches of Christendom includes only the faithful on earth, who "being united to one another in love have communion in each other's gifts and graces" (Westminster Confession), embraces according to Catholic theology the faithful in purgatory and in heaven. The Church militant, suffering and triumphant, is united in a spiritual solidarity, and the links which bind all of her members together are invocation, intercession and veneration. When a Catholic dies, his friends follow him in spirit, praying for the repose of his soul. The fervor and insistence of these prayers prove the longing that lies in many hearts to reach the beloved dead. The sense of nearness, the devout belief that from the treasury of grace help may be drawn for the departed whose period of spiritual activity is over, fortifies the mourner by giving him a task to perform. Serenity is restored with the blessedness of service.

A writer in the *Nineteenth Century* for March, 1919, asserts that Spiritism will in time be able to link "ordinary humanity with the Divine Hierarchy," and that it will do this by means of certain elect souls, "advanced leaders of our race, Masters of Wisdom and Knowledge." This has a familiar sound. What are the saints but advanced leaders, wise with the wisdom of incorruption? And what is their mission but to link "ordinary humanity" with God? It is hard for any one outside the pale of Catholicism to appreciate the sweetness and vitality which the Church triumphant infuses into the Church militant. Sixteen hundred years ago a child of thirteen was beheaded in Rome. Today, Catholic women bearing her name receive letters and flowers and gifts on the twenty-first of January, because that is the feast day of this little Roman saint. It is a long chain and a strong chain which binds us to our dead.

In all this there is an absence of curiosity, of restless and morbid prying into the supernatural. I do not say that such curiosity is unknown to the devout. How often in pious reading have we come across the phrase: "It was revealed to the blessed Saint ——;" and then followed particulars more or less edifying which we were at liberty to receive as we liked.

The Church has always maintained a discreet silence concerning these revelations. "What is called superstition is but suggestion in its unacknowledged and unconsolidated form;" says an acute English writer, endeavoring to straighten out the devious paths of psychical research.

There are upholders of Spiritism who claim that it will renew the faith of the world. Listening to the eloquent pleadings of Sir Oliver Lodge, one would imagine that there was no such thing as belief in the immortality of the soul, and that he was bringing this consoling doctrine to a race which had either never heard of it, or had forgotten all about it. Professor Hyslop admits the existence of faith, but proposes to render it superfluous by offering direct evidence of survival. He will replace the Communion of Saints with the communion of spirits, and the invocations of the Church with mediums and controls. Because these mediums are sometimes frauds, and the controls often give indications of feeble-mindedness (as in the case of Raymond Lodge's *Feda*), we are disposed to underrate the fast-growing influence of Spiritism upon a disturbed and sorrowful world.

In this we are at fault. Mr. Cyril E. Hudson, who has made a careful study of conditions in England (a land friendly to ghosts), says plainly that Spiritism is a rival to Christianity. Its advocates are wont to speak of it picturesquely as a "handmaid" of religion, inasmuch as it fortifies belief in the unseen. "But, as a matter of experience, it is found that a man who becomes a Spiritualist ceases almost invariably to be a Christian in any traditional sense of the word. Not for nothing has the Christian Church throughout her history discouraged the practice of necromancy, the morbid concern with the dead which must interfere with the proper discharge of our duties in that plane of existence in which God has placed us."

Mr. Hudson also calls our attention to one phase of the subject which is often ignored, but which is of the utmost importance. In Sir William Barrett's *On the Threshold*, we find references to "mischievous and deceptive communications," as well as to the profane and obscene matter which occasionally intrudes itself into automatic writing. "Some who have taken the trouble to inquire," says Barrett, "have come to believe that Spiritism reveals the existence of a mysterious power which may be of a more or less malignant

character. Granting the existence of a spirit world, it is necessary to be on our guard against the invasion of our will by a lower order of intelligence and morality."

This is a great deal for an ardent Spiritist to acknowledge. No such word of warning comes from Sir Oliver Lodge's lips; yet it represents the darker side of this strange substitute for Christian faith. Without venturing to speculate too luridly on the nature of supernatural visitants, it is folly to assume that—if such visitants exist—they are necessarily benignant, or that evil spirits will not cross the threshold when the door is opened. And we cannot protest too strongly against the subjection of the medium to influences of which she and her clients are necessarily ignorant. If she is what she claims to be, she voluntarily surrenders the control of faculties of which she is the proper and the sole guardian, which have been given her for her own direction, and which it is the instinct of every sane man and woman to protect from assault.

If it be the mitigation of grief which Spiritists seek in their efforts to communicate with the dead, they are easily comforted. Sir Oliver Lodge has assured us that the messages sent by soldiers killed in battle have proved consolatory to their families and friends. But beyond vague assurances of happiness, and occasional references to "carrying on," the soldier spirits, like all other spirits, cling tenaciously, and with what has been termed "maniacal energy," to the least significant recollections of their mortal lives. The wider outlook has been lost, the larger purposes forgotten; but a pocket knife mislaid in boyhood, or a slang phrase, common to thousands of other young men, lingers in their memories, and becomes the pivot of their laborious communications. The parent of a lad killed in action went, at Sir Oliver's suggestion, to a medium who spelled out the word U-L-L-O-E-R-B. It seemed meaningless to the mother; but the father deciphered it as "Ullo 'Erb!" familiar syllables heard often from his son's lips, and he was perfectly satisfied with the identification.

The painful lack of intelligence manifested by spirits, the puerility of their messages, and the apparent narrowness of their confines, are accounted for by the difficulty of intercourse, and by the number of middle men employed. The spirit communicates with the control, who communicates with the me-

dium, who communicates with the sitter. Naturally something is lost in this multiplicity of parts, and naturally, as Lodge feelingly observes, "a great deal of rubbish comes through." One of "Raymond's" controls was an American Indian named "Redfeather," and another a little girl, Indian or Negro, named "Feda," who must have exasperated his family to the verge of madness.

The Spiritists are logical in asserting that the nature of the communications received from the dead cannot disqualify their validity. If it be proven that the messages are genuine, our disappointment at their triviality is not a determining factor. It does, however, materially lessen the number of intelligent converts to Spiritism. Sensitive minds are repelled by the earthiness of souls who have escaped from earth; practical minds by their incompetence. "If anybody would endow me," wrote Huxley, "with the faculty of listening to the chatter of old women and curates in the nearest Cathedral town, I should decline the privilege, having better things to do. And if the folk in the spiritual world do not talk more wisely and sensibly than their friends report them to do, I put them in the same category."

Mæterlinck, that great lover of borderlands who dwells preferably in the shadows, finds the company of accredited spirits (I use the term only to designate those who are introduced to us with the usual formalities) to be inexpressibly burdensome and depressing. He is not incredulous. He can relate with enviable gravity the details of an evening call paid by a monk who had lain in the cloisters of the Abbaye de Saint-Wandrille since 1693, and who broke a sleep of two centuries that he might spin a table on one leg for the diversion of the poet's guests. The simplicity of this form of entertainment was accepted by Mæterlinck with a tolerant shrug; but his taste, his scholarship, his vivid and delicate imagination revolt from the fruitless chatter of the séance.

"Why," he asks, "do the dead jealously hug the narrow strip of territory which memory occupies on the confines of both worlds, and from which only indecisive evidence can reach us? Are there then no other outlets, no other horizons? Why do they tarry about us, stagnant in their little pasts, when, free from the flesh, they might wander at ease over the virgin stretches of space and time? Do they not know that the sign

which will prove to us that they survive is to be found not with us, but with them, on the other side of the grave? Why do they come back with empty hands and empty words? Is this what one finds when one is steeped in infinity? Of what use is it to die, if all life's trivialities continue? Is it worth while to have passed through the terrifying gorges which open on the eternal fields in order to remember that we had a great uncle named Peter, and that our Cousin Paul was afflicted with varicose veins? Rather would I choose for those I love the august and frozen solitudes of the everlasting nothing."

More painful to contemplate than mere inanity is the evidence proffered us from time to time of the survival of physical and mental infirmities. Mr. J. Arthur Hill, writing in 1917, tells us of being present at a séance where one of the spirits was a very old and feeble man. The medium described him as "tottering with age," and having "a job to stand up;" but no one seemed depressed by his plight, or by the possibilities it suggested for all of them. Dr. Hodgson described a séance at which his dead friends were chatty and communicative with the single exception of a spirit who, having established his identity, refused to say another word. His silence was pregnant with meaning to the little group of sitters, because they knew that before death he had been reduced to mental exhaustion by severe headaches, and they understood that he was exhausted still. Things are as they are, whether we like them or not; but to offer Spiritism as a spur to human hope, and a solace to human affections, seems a bit beside the mark.

"There are as great fools in the spirit world as ever there were in this," said Henry More over two hundred years ago. Were he living now, and in active communication with the dead, he would intensify his language. The one thing made clear to us is that the spirits who manifest themselves by means of mediums, ouija boards, or rapping tables, are on a lower plane of intelligence than we are. Enamoured of trivialities, unconcerned about vital things, they exhaust what little rationality they possess in the laborious process of identification.

The famous "Julia's Bureau," established in London by Mr. W. T. Stead, and named after the letter-writing ghost whose correspondence he gave the world, was for long the favorite agency through which distinguished spirits communi-

cated with their equally distinguished friends. It was said that Gladstone, Disraeli, Victor Hugo, and even Cardinal Manning, appeared at this bureau, while Dickens, a bustling and clamorous ghost, could not be kept away. On earth these brilliant and versatile minds acquired with every year fresh ideas and increased knowledge; but, stranded by death in a stagnant land, they had apparently not taken one intellectual step. After the death of Professor Lombroso (an ardent Spiritist), in October, 1909, Signor Guglielmo Emmanuel visited London and Julia's Bureau, hoping to receive from his dead colleague some evidence of survival. What was his amazement to discover that, in the two intervening months, Lombroso had, indeed, learned the English language—hitherto unknown—but had forgotten the Italian of his lifetime.

Professor Hyslop unhesitatingly asserts that Spiritism speaks in the name of science. "It intends that its belief shall have the same credentials as Copernican astronomy, Newtonian gravitation, and Darwinian evolution. It is not uncertain in its sound." Yet, so far, the standard of evidence is low; and the investigatory volumes which are published in swift succession reiterate for the most part unsupported claims. There is not sufficient allowance made for the influence of that strange subconscious self of which we are just beginning to take cognizance. And for that radical weakness of the human mind, credulity, there is no allowance made at all. That people see what they come prepared to see, and hear what they come prepared to hear, and believe what they come prepared to believe, is a truth as old as humanity. Another truth, less taken into account, is that credulity strengthens with every indulgence. It becomes a habit of mind. The man who accepts insufficient evidence once or twice begins to lose his power of resistance. The walls of his mind give way.

This is what has befallen Sir Oliver Lodge. A scientist, trained in accurate thinking, and accustomed to sift evidence, he has little by little surrendered his intellect to a process of disintegration. He still clings to scientific terms, and has a charming clarity of speech; but the scientific spirit has collapsed under the insidious influence of the unearthly. He is no longer a cold and cautious investigator, but rather resembles a grandfather telling fairy tale after fairy tale to please confiding grandchildren.

And what happens when a current of credulity sweeps a civilized land? A rank growth of superstition springs up in its wake, and men turn back with startling ease to the least desirable delusions of the Middle Ages. Apparitions have become the order of the day. Sick people are proffered ghostly prescriptions for their maladies. Rectors have been asked by their parishioners for "charms" to ward off misfortune. Men whom we deemed sane write that a wooden table applauded the music which pleased it, or "fluttered like a wounded bird, and dropped gently to the door." Young women devote themselves to automatic writing, and reel off spectral literature of surpassing fatuity. It was testified in a New Jersey court that a man had bought some farm land because the spirit of a young girl (Feda must have crossed the sea) had revealed the existence of treasure—two million dollars worth of treasure—buried beneath the soil. Two gypsy women were arraigned before a Brooklyn magistrate on a charge of stealing the money they had been commissioned to "bless." And all this in the twentieth century, with the experience of the ages to enlighten us.

Moreover, twentieth century superstition is far more dangerous than was eleventh century superstition, because we are less fitted, mentally and physically, to face it. In the Middle Ages, men and women had no nerves. War, pestilence, violence, the sacking of towns, the savage cruelty of the law, the fate of unfortunates who languished in dungeons or died on the rack, failed to impair the vitality of the race, or dim its love for life. Men took their superstitions, as they took other picturesque and terrifying conditions, without more thinking than was necessary. But we, nervous, fretful, introspective, morbidly sensitive, imperfectly educated and ignorant of our ignorance, how shall we meet this tide of occultism, and keep our sanity and self-control? The horrors of the War destroyed our serenity, the sorrows of the War blighted our happiness. We believed vaguely in the goodness of mankind; and the ferocity of Germany's campaign shook the foundations of this belief. We have discovered that nothing is more possible than the thing we called morally impossible. What wonder that with the downfall of familiar convictions, the cession of familiar thoughts, there shall come this onrush of superstition which is not the less hurtful for its folly.

Gertrude Kingston, in a very able paper on telepathy and hypnotic suggestions, comments upon the general absence of ghosts in Italy. Every house in England or Scotland that has witnessed a crime of sufficient magnitude harbors its family spectre, who appears at appropriate intervals, and keeps alive ancestral traditions. But there are blood-stained old palaces in Rome, in Florence, in Perugia, whose very walls might shriek their tale of horror, yet where no man's sleep is broken. Miss Kingston attributes this peaceful atmosphere to the influence and practices of the Church. "Ghosts," she writes, "are not encouraged in Roman Catholic countries, owing to the habit of saying Masses for the repose of the dead, thus preventing all subconscious suggestion of an uneasy spirit's return, by removing the motive of its visit."

This is the Communion of Saints. This is the service rendered by the living to the dead. If we content ourselves with a spiritual bond, which is a real and vital thing, if we can dispense with rapping tables, and the spelling of words on a ouija board, and the intrusion of controls, then something stronger, sweeter, holier than the disjointed intercourse of the séance will unite us with the faithful departed. Like David, we shall go to them, but they shall not return to us.
