

WERE D. D. HOME'S 'SPIRIT HANDS' EVER
FRAUDULENTLY PRODUCED?

by G. ZORAB

TAKEN in a general sense a consensus of opinion can be noted among the early psychical researchers that D. D. Home's physical phenomena were of a truly paranormal nature. Investigators of the calibre of F. W. H. Myers, W. Crookes and several others professed themselves convinced that no evidence of any importance had ever been brought forward to show that Home had at any time been detected tricking his sitters by making use of fraudulent practices. Many of Home's séances were held under such conditions of visibility and control that it would have been very difficult for the medium to cheat his audience by sleight of hand or other such conjuror's feats and thereby make those present believe that they were witnessing paranormal phenomena.

A distinguishing feature of Home's mediumship was the production of extraordinarily powerful physical phenomena of various kinds. First, those of a telekinetic or psychokinetic nature such as the moving about or levitation of all kinds of furniture (levitation of the medium himself was also described); further, the production of raps to be heard coming from every part of the séance-room or from table-tops, the sitters' limbs or dresses. Falling within the psychokinetic category was also the remarkable, so-called earthquake effect, i.e. the séance-room and its furniture starting to tremble and move up and down as if an earthquake were taking place.

Another notable feature of Home's physical phenomena concerns materialization. Many sitters describe seeing materializations of human hands, fingers or arms, etc., sometimes well-formed and active, at other sittings resembling stuffed gloves or such like objects. Full-form materializations, but then only in a more or less shadowy form, seem to have been observed once or twice.

Phenomena, apparently of a nature intermediate between telekinesis and materialization, are often described in the form of touching and pulling the sitters' dresses, pinching or pressing parts of their bodies, thereby giving the impression that human hands and fingers, though mostly unseen, were at work. The same may be said of playing the accordion by paranormal means, one of Home's common mediumistic performances. Sometimes hands were observed on the keys by one or two of the audience, at

other times by all present. The same may also be said of the curious bulging of the séance-table's table-cloth as if a hand or clenched fist were being moved under it. Probably in connection with F. W. H. Myers' and W. F. Barrett's review of Mrs Home's books on the life and performances of her husband¹ which gave a very favourable testimony of the authenticity of Home's phenomena and of his trustworthiness, a Mr F. Merrifield came forward declaring that he had been an eye-witness of what he believed to have been trickery practised by Home. (J.S.P.R., 1889, IV, pp. 120-121).

Mr Merrifield had been present, together with his fiancée, Miss de Gaudrion, at one of Home's sittings at Ealing in the summer of 1855, and in the course of that sitting held in a very poor light had observed a small 'spirit hand', visible to all present, whose movements had corresponded with those of Home's shoulder and upper arm. It is understandable that Merrifield's observation raised grave doubts in his mind as to Home's reliability as a medium, so that Merrifield became very suspicious regarding the paranormal character of at least some of Home's physical phenomena.

Several years later Mr Merrifield's notes, written a week or so after attending the Home séance at Ealing, together with correspondence between Miss de Gaudrion and the Brownings on the subject of the Home phenomena, were published in the S.P.R. Journal (V). It is my intention in this paper to compare Mr Merrifield's impressions concerning the 'spirit hand' he believed to be a fake with Mrs Browning's description of 'spirit hands' observed by her during a sitting with Home at Ealing only a couple of weeks before Mr Merrifield attended his séance. When Mr Merrifield's observations, etc. were printed in 1903 the contents of Mrs Browning's letter to her sister reporting on the phenomena she and her husband, together with Bulwer-Lytton, perceived at a sitting with Home at Ealing, had not yet been published, and so at the time were not available. They were brought to the notice of the public only in 1919.² As far I am aware, a comparison of these two reports on sittings with Home in the same house at Ealing in the summer of 1885 has never been attempted. This task I now take upon myself.

MR F. MERRIFIELD'S REPORT (1855)

The following notes were written a few weeks after his sitting with Home in July, 1855.* They were probably written out with

* The notes were written out on August 18, 1855.