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Abstract and train of thoughts

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So long as “Spirit” photography instead of being regarded as a science, is presented to the public as a new Revelation from the God of Israel and Jacob, the jury will continue deliberating for much longer. 6



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Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye, by Miss G. Houghton. London: E.W. Allen, 1882

A neat and curious volume, “Illustrated by six Plates containing fifty-four Miniature Reproductions from the Original Photographs.” The book is full of valuable testimony. It comes from some of the most eminent men of science and literature of the day, who all testify to the fact that photographs have been, and are, taken from “Spirit Beings,” their more or less shadowy forms appearing on the negative near or about the sitters in visible flesh and blood. “His Most Serene Highness, George, Prince de Solms,” is one of the witnesses to the phenomena. In a letter incorporated in the *Preface* he remarks:

I have examined the various explanations which have been offered of imitating the spirit-photographs, but certainly none that I have seen are sufficient to account for the phenomena . . . I am not aware of any possible explanation of photographs of this description, *of which the figure is displayed partly before and partly behind the person sitting.*¹ [61]

Another eminent witness, Mr. A.R. Wallace, the Naturalist, also gives his testimony. He says:

If a person with a knowledge of photography takes his own glass plates, examines the camera used and all the accessories, and watches the whole process of taking a picture, then, if any definite form appears on the negative besides the sitter, it is a proof that some object was present capable of reflecting or emitting the actinic rays, although invisible to those present . . . the fact that any figures so clear and unmistakably human in appearance as these should appear on plates taken in [a] private studio by an experienced optician and amateur photographer, who makes all his apparatus himself, and with no one present . . . is a real marvel.²

Quite so; and the evidence is so strong in favour of the genuineness of the interesting phenomenon, that to doubt its possibility would be paramount to proclaiming oneself a bigoted ignoramus. Nor is it the *fact* of the phenomenon we doubt. We are thinking rather of the causes underlying it. The more we study the clear, perfectly logical and connected evidence of the eyewitnesses gathered in Miss Houghton’s interesting vol-

¹ [p. vii]

² [pp. 205-7]

ume, the more we compare it with her own testimony, and then turn to the illustrations given in the book, the less we feel ready to recognize in the latter the direct work of Spirits, *i.e.*, of disembodied Egos. This is no sophistical cavil of prejudice or predetermined negation, as some of our critics may think; but the sincere expression of honest truth. We do not even attribute the appearance of the figures, so mysteriously appearing without any seemingly physical cause for it, to the work of the elementary or the elementals — so odious to the orthodox Spiritualist. We simply venture to ask why such photographs, without being a fraudulent imitation — and even though one day recognized as phenomenal by the Royal Society — should be necessarily “Spirit pictures” — and not something else? Why should the forms so appearing — often no forms at all, but patches of formless light, in which it is as easy to detect figures and faces and likenesses, as it is in a passing cloud, or even in a spot of dirt upon a wall — why should they be rather taken for the pictures from original human or any other Spirits than for the reflection of what is already impressed as images of men and things photographed on the invisible space around us? A more or less successful reproduction [62] (the photographer remaining unconscious of it) — of a deceased person’s features *from an image already impressed in the aura* of the living medium, or the persons present, would not be a dishonest attempt to impose upon the credulous, but a *bona fide* phenomenon. Let us once grant for the sake of argument this hypothesis, and it would account perfectly for the “figure displayed partly before and partly behind the person sitting.” Moreover, the theory would cover the ground and explain every unsatisfactory feature in such photographs, features hitherto unaccountable but on the theory of fraud. The “daughter of Jairus” would not appear in the aura of a Hindu medium, not if he were to sit for a thousand years before a camera. But the said biblical personage is a very natural reproduction in the presence of a Protestant, an intensely pious medium, whose thoughts are wholly absorbed with the Bible; whose mind is full of the miracles of Jesus Christ; and who gives thanks, after every successful “spirit-photograph,” to the “wisdom of God” by blessing and praising his name. A Hindu or a Buddhist medium would evoke no “spoon” emerging from a ray of celestial light above his head — but rather his fingers with which he eats his food. But the biblical interpretation given by the author¹ to explain the apparition of the spoon after she had placed a marker in the Bible (the passage referring to the twelve spoons of gold, the offering of the Princes of Israel), is just as we should expect it. Nor would an orthodox heathen cause to appear on the photograph, surrounded by a cluster of clouds, pictures “found to be a representation of the Holy Family” — for the simple reason that having never given a thought to the latter family, no such picture could be created by his mind, whether conscious or unconscious; hence none being found invisibly impressed around him, none could be caught in the focus. Were, on the other hand, a picture of a boar or a fish to appear instead, or that of a blue gentleman playing on the flute; and were a Hindu medium to recognize in the former the two *Avatars* of Vishnu, and in the latter Krishna, we doubt whether any Christian Spiritualist would be fair enough to admit of the correctness of the symbolical [63] interpretation, or even of the genuineness of the “Spir-

¹ pages 78 and 79

its,” since no Christian sensitive believes in either *such* Avatars, or in a cerulean-coloured god.

The most remarkable feature, in the book under review, is its illustrated plates. In their intrinsic value, the miniature photographs are perfect. They do the greatest honour to both the talent of the artist and the perseverance and patience of the author required of her, before she could achieve such fine results. As “Spirit” photographs, however, they allow a large margin for criticism, as they leave everything unexplained, and the figures are by no means satisfactory. From Plate I to Plate VI, with one or two exceptions, the figures of the Spirits exhibit a strange sameness and rigidity. Beginning with “Mamma extending her hand towards me” and ending with “Tommy’s grandmother,”¹ nine groups in nine different attitudes represent to our profane eye but two and the same persons in each picture: the author and a shrouded ghost — with features invisible. In each case, the Spirit is wrapped up in the traditional white shroud, very pertinently called by some correspondent in the work the “conventional *white-sheeted ghost*.” Why it should be so, is not sufficiently explained on the theory given² that “the human form is more difficult to materialize than drapery.” If it is a “*Spirit Power* . . . used in God’s Wisdom to promote the visible appearance of spirit forms,” as we are told,³ then both the power and wisdom fall very wide of the mark that should be expected from them. And if not, then why such a servile copy of the conventional ghosts in theatricals?

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There are many valuable, interesting and highly scientific attempts at explanation found scattered throughout the work, and evidence given by well-known writers of ability and learning. But the opinion we agree with the most, is contained in the extracts given from Mr. John Beattie’s paper — published in the *Spiritual Magazine* for January 1873, on the “Philosophy of Spirit-Photography.” We will quote a few lines:

All our most competent thinkers in the great schools of physical science . . . are forced to the conclusion that there exists an infinite [64] ocean of ether, in which all material substance floats, and through which are transmitted all the forces in the physical universe. . . . In photography we have to deal with purely physical conditions. Is there any proof that in the production of these pictures any other than physical conditions have had play? . . . In the spirit-photographs taken under my observation, I had considerable proof that spirit-substance *was not photographed*. The forms were vague, but as photographs extremely well defined . . . these forms are such, and are so singularly related to one another that, even to the superficial, it is impossible not to see that such a series of forms could never have been conceived of by anyone who would have had a mind to deceive. . . . We daily hear of spirit-photographs being made, many of them said to be recognized as likenesses of friends. . . . Now are these photo-

¹ Plate I

² p. 207

³ p. 21

graphs any other than material resemblances, *moulded by spiritual beings*, of substances capable, when so condensed, of throwing off energy very actively. . . . I have seen many of the photographs said to be likenesses. I have two before me now: the same gentleman in both. In one there is with him a sitting figure half under the carpet, clearly from an etching of a face with a *profile type exactly like his own*; in the other there is a standing figure extremely tall and ill-defined. *In both cases it is said to be his mother. . . . No likeness could be discerned between the two.* The sitting figure evidently had been taken from some drawing.

I mention all this to combat the notion that the actual spirit can be photographed. I have seen a large number of them which I believe to be genuine, but in no case have I seen them indicating the free play of true life. Besides, we cannot believe spiritual light to depend upon physical laws such as reflection, absorption, *etc.*, but rather on states of the perceiving mind. If I am right, within the range of psychological phenomena, spirit-photography must take a high place in usefulness, if marked by suitable evidence without which all manifestations are worthless.

Men more cautious, those of Mr. Beattie's turn of mind, would rather think that they are "Photographs *by Spirits*," the form of the object having [65] been given from plastic invisible substance "by intelligent beings *outside* of it and moulded into shape for their purpose." And we (the Occultists) say, that they are objective copies from *subjective* photographs impressed upon the ether of space, and constantly thrown out by our thoughts, words, and deeds. . . .

An occult explanation of "Spirit" photographs is that they are objective copies from subjective photographs impressed upon the ether of space, and constantly thrown out by our thoughts, words, and deeds.

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We heartily concur with all that is said above, but we disagree entirely with one of the conclusions and deductions drawn therefrom by Mr. Beattie. So far the genuineness of the phenomenon, called "spirit-photography," is sufficiently proved. But before we dogmatize upon the agency or rather the causes producing the phenomenal effects, we have to consider three theories, and choose the one which not only covers most of the ground, but explains, in the most satisfactory way, the evident defects in the results so far obtained. Now the Spiritualists maintain that these pictures are the photographs of spirits. Men more cautious, those of Mr. Beattie's turn of mind, would rather think that they are "Photographs *by Spirits*," the form of the object having [65] been given from plastic invisible substance "by intelligent beings *outside* of it and moulded into shape for their purpose." And we (the Occultists) say, that they are objective copies from *subjective* photographs impressed upon the ether of space, and constantly thrown out by our thoughts, words, and deeds. . . .

The final verdict as to who of us is right and who wrong, can be brought out by the jury of reason only after a better and more reliable evidence is obtained of the *facts*,

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MADAME BLAVATSKY ON SPIRIT PHOTOGRAPHS

and, upon a profounder acquaintance with the Invisible Universe and Psychology; both, moreover, have first to become entirely separated from, and independent of, anything like preconceived notions, or a sectarian colouring. So long as “Spirit-Photography,” instead of being regarded as a science, is presented to the public as a new Revelation from the God of Israel and Jacob, very few sober men of science, will care to submit to a microscopic inspection “Mary the Virgin, Mother of our Lord,” or even “St. John with a dove and three stars in the niche above him.”

