

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.

a view to the coming correspondence with the Brownings. Miss de Gaudrion's letter to the Brownings would probably have reached the latter in the course of the last week of August, for Mr Browning's reply was dated August 30.

... we took our seats—about fourteen in number—round a circular table, in a room, the floor of which was on a level with the lawn, and communicated with it by two windows opening to the ground. [Then follows mention of the heaving up of the table, tapping, playing an accordion under the table, plucking of dresses, and patting of knees, etc., but not of any 'spirit hands' at that time.] (*Jnl. V.*, p. 77).

The passage between square brackets is of some interest in so far that it shows that Mr Merrifield did not express the slightest suspicion regarding the paranormality of Home's typical phenomena witnessed by him, e.g. levitation of a table weighing more than a hundred pounds (a circular table seating at least fourteen persons!), patting of knees, an accordion playing under the table, presumably without being touched, etc. All this happening under a good light, since the lights were removed from the séance-room only when the 'spirit hand' sitting commenced with a greatly reduced number of sitters (*Jnl. V.*, p. 77). So in all probability the fourteen sitters mentioned in the quotation had every opportunity to convince themselves that it was not Home who raised the table, plucked the dresses, tapped the knees or played the accordion.

Mr Merrifield's notes continue:

Just as we were on the point of taking our leave, the medium professed his readiness to give us another sitting. Accordingly, we took our places at the side of the table, the medium occupying the extreme right, and a constant associate of his* sitting opposite to him. I sat nearly halfway between them, and therefore facing the windows. The table was circular, and the semi-circle nearest the window was unoccupied. The lights were removed, and very soon the operations began. It was about eleven o'clock; the moon had set, but the night was starlight, and we could well see the outline of the windows and distinguish, though not with accuracy of outline, the form of any large object intervening before them. The medium sat as low as possible in his low seat. His arms and hands were under the table. He talked freely, encouraging conversation, and seeming uneasy when that flagged. After a few preliminary raps somebody exclaimed that the 'spirit hand' had appeared, and the next moment an object resembling a child's hand with a long wide sleeve attached to it, appeared before the light. This

* This associate was Mr J. S. Rymer in whose house at Ealing Home stayed several months in 1855, and where sittings were held practically every day.

occurred several times. The object appeared mainly at one or other of two separate distances from the medium. One of these distances was just that of his foot, the other that of his out-stretched hand; and when the object receded or approached I noticed that the medium's body or shoulder sank or rose in his chair accordingly. This was pretty conclusive to myself and the friend that accompanied me; but afterwards, upon the invitation of one of the dupes present, the 'spirit hand' rose so high that we saw the whole connection between the medium's shoulder and arm, and the 'spirit hand' dressed out on the end of his own.⁵

It can well be imagined that Mr Merrifield's observations, which coincided with those of his fiancée (he writes: 'we saw' the connection of the medium's person with the spirit hand)⁵ made him believe that the medium was using some kind of dummy to impersonate a materialized limb of some supernatural entity. However, points in Home's favour are first, that it was not Home who had insisted that the sitting should be postponed till the room would be wrapped in greater darkness, and second that the medium did not seem to have left the séance-room for a single moment before the second sitting commenced. Thus he did not need to retire to fetch the special apparatus necessary to fake the 'spirit hand' (if he was not carrying it upon him all the time), and was not so very much concerned regarding the state of darkness (which could point to the fact that he was convinced of the paranormal nature of his phenomena).

Let us now compare this sitting described by Mr Merrifield with one attended by Mrs Browning. We know that Mr Merrifield and his fiancée had their sitting in July, 1855. We also know from Mrs Browning's letter to her sister on July 13 that she was going to see Home a day or two later. Mrs Browning wrote to her sister again on August 17th, 1855 to describe this sitting about a month after it had taken place. Miss de Gaudrion's letter to Mrs Browning, informing her of what she and her fiancé had observed and believed to be a faked 'spirit hand', and requesting Mrs Browning to give her her opinion regarding the authenticity of Home's phenomena, was written and received by the Brownings after Mrs Browning had sent off her letter to her sister. Here we quote Mrs Browning's letter:²

We were touched by the invisible, heard the music and raps, saw the table moved, and had sight of the hands. Also at the request of the medium, the spiritual hands took from the table a garland which lay there and placed it upon my head. The particular hand which did this was of the largest human size, as white as snow, and very beautiful. It was as near to me as this hand I write with, and I saw it as distinctly. I was perfectly calm! not troubled in any way, and felt convinced in

my own mind that *no spirit belonging* to me was present at the occasion. The hands which appeared at a distance from me I put up my glass to look at—proving that it was not a mere mental impression, and that they are subject to the usual laws of vision. These hands seemed to Robert and me to come from under the table, but Mr Lytton* saw them rise out of the *wood* of the table—also he tells me . . . that he saw a spiritual (so-called) arm elongate itself as much as two yards across the table and then float away to the windows, where it disappeared. Robert and I did not touch the hands. Mr. Lytton and Sir Edward† *both did*. The feel was warm and human—rather warmer in fact than is common with a man's hand. The music was beautiful.'^{2,3}

Comparing the two Home sittings referred to here, and which in all probability were held in the same room in the Rymers' house at Ealing, one is struck by the fact that, apart from the materialization phenomena produced, the manifestations of a physical nature were practically the same. There were the identical touchings and pappings, the raps, table-movements, accordion playing, etc. It seems that in those days Home's usual phenomena had already become so well-known and a matter of course that they did not excite that feeling of wonder and unbelief any more, which apparently was brought about by the more rarely to be observed materialization of 'spirit hands'. Mrs Browning devoted the greater part of her report to these 'spirit hands', while Merrifield quite probably voiced his disappointment to Home after the first séance ended that no 'spirit hands' had occurred and so persuaded the medium to attempt producing them in a second sitting this time conducted in a very poor light.

Mrs Browning *cum suis* was more fortunate in this matter, and apparently was able to observe the materialization phenomena in a well illuminated room. The 'spirit hand' which Mr Merrifield perceived in a very dim light and believed to be faked gave him the impression of being a 'child's hand'. According to Mrs Browning's letter she saw several hands. The hand that, for all to see, took up a garland from the table and placed it on her head was of *the largest human size, white as snow*. Clearly quite a different hand from the one observed by Mr Merrifield. And what is more, it appeared at such a short distance from Mrs Browning and under such good visibility that it could be viewed in the very same manner as she could see her own hand while writing her letter, i.e. the distance could not have been more than

* This gentleman is probably Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton's son (1831-1891)

† This is the well-known writer Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton. The Lyttons had had their sitting with Home some two days earlier than the Brownings, and soon afterwards related their experience to Mrs Browning.

12-15 in. The hands were appearing not only at a single point but at all parts of the séance table. This table must have been of a large size, for Mrs Browning who apparently was very myopic had to use her lorgnette in order to get the distant hands into clear focus.* Two persons touched the hands, convincing themselves that they were not feeling bogus hands attached to some kind of apparatus making them move about like puppets. 'The feel was warm and human', and this sensation may be considered in contradiction with that brought about by fabricated artefacts. No mention is made of hands somehow bound up with a kind of white sleeve as Mr Merrifield seems to have observed. The Brownings' hands apparently were only human hands cut off at the wrists so to say. There is also that remarkable observation by Mr Lytton of an arm elongating itself as much as two yards across the table and then floating to the window. Could Mr Merrifield possibly have seen such an arm sticking out of Home's shoulder?

Mrs Browning's report of a sitting under good conditions of visibility and control (sitters were even allowed to touch the 'spirit hands'), and held only a few weeks before the one Mr. Merrifield attended, does in many ways put Mr Merrifield's observation in a very poor light and his conclusion of fraud based thereupon out of court. For if young Home was able to produce all the various phenomena described by Mrs Browning, why should he resort to tricking his audience by manoeuvring about a stuffed glove on a stick held under his arm? It is therefore, in my opinion, justified to say that in view of Home's mediumistic performances at the time the phenomenon perceived by Mr Merrifield may well have been one of a paranormal nature and not necessarily one fraudulently produced.

* The séance-table commonly in use at the Rymers' house was a very large one, and named by Mr Rymer his 'long table'. T. A. Trollope⁷ informs us that it was 'a very large and very heavy old-fashioned mahogany dining table'. Merrifield remarks that 14 persons were seated at that table which he describes as circular.⁵ According to Mr Barlee who attended a séance on May 8th, 1855, the table was large enough for a party of twenty.⁶ All these descriptions suggest that a very large table was used at the Ealing sittings, so that if it was necessary for Mrs Browning to use her lorgnette in order to distinctly see the hands at the far end of the table, that distance may have been some three yards or more. That would also indicate that it must have been virtually impossible for Home to have manipulated the 'spirit hands' with his arms or legs or with some kind of instrument. Even if this had been possible, we are left with the problem how Home could have faked an active functioning human hand to pick up a garland from the table and place it on Mrs Browning's head, right under the noses of herself and the other sitters.

The phenomena observed at the Browning sitting also shed a curious light on Mr Browning's irrational attitude regarding these manifestations. Answering Miss de Gaudrion's letter Mrs Browning stated:

But if you ask me (as you do) whether I would rank the phenomena witnessed at Ealing among the counterfeits, I sincerely answer that I may be mistaken, of course, but for my own part, and in my own conscience, I find no reason for considering the medium in question responsible for anything seen or heard on that occasion.' (Jnl. IV, p. 12)

Mrs Browning's answer was accompanied by a letter from Mr Browning in the third person, informing Miss de Gaudrion:

Mr Browning did, in company with his wife, witness Mr Hume's performances at Ealing . . . , and he is hardly able to account for the fact that there can be another opinion than his own on the matter—that being that the whole display of 'hands', 'spirit utterances', etc. were a cheat and imposture.⁴

In connection with the above it is indeed remarkable to read the long report Mr Browning wrote in connection with this sitting and which was first printed in the United States in 1933. 'He says that he could not account for the vibrations and movements of the table, but he makes no mention of what he afterwards used to say about the spirit-hands being attached, as he thought to Home's feet. Indeed, he says that one hand crawled, as it were, up Mr Home's shoulder . . .'.³ It must have been at this very sitting that Mr Browning conceived a violent hatred for Home. Maybe because the 'spirit hands' did not put the garland on his head but selected his wife for that honour. It is also possible that Browning's philosophy and religious beliefs concerning the hereafter forced him to shield himself behind a declaration of fraud and imposture, since accepting the authenticity of the phenomena would automatically include accepting survival as a very vulgar state, where the spirits delighted in moving about furniture, tickling mortals and playing the accordion.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Readers interested in this subject may like to know that the account published as Appendix D in the Journal for 1889 was in fact written by Mr Merrifield himself; a piece of information for which I should like to thank Dr E. J. Dingwall.

REVIEW OF CONTINENTAL PERIODICAL
LITERATURE 1970

by G. ZORAB

The Netherlands

Teunissen, J., 'Zinneschok en Zweefervaring' (Sensory shock and the experience of floating). *Tijdschrift voor Parapsychologie*, 38, 1970, 61-63.

The author, a psychiatrist, discusses here the sensation of floating in the air that patients experience in direct connection with skull injuries, compression fractures of the posterior half of the head and similar lesions. Such patients have the sensation of being carried up to heaven, believe themselves to be in the heavenly spheres, etc. They also may fall into ecstatic states of a religious nature, or believe themselves to be floating about. There was one man who was convinced that he had been allowed to enter the Garden of Eden. Another firmly believed that he had died and was now surviving as a spirit in Summerland.

The author suggests that such cases should not be regarded as originating from purely physiological processes but that a parapsychological explanation should be taken into account, viz. that the sensation of floating could very well be caused by the 'projection of the astral body'.

I wonder whether an extensive collection of spontaneous experiences of astral projection, out-of-the-body sensations, etc.,