

## OPEN LETTER TO DR. STANLEY HALL.

FROM ANDREW LANG.

ALLEYNE HOUSE,  
ST. ANDREWS, *December 1st, 1910.*

DEAR SIR,

Excuse the liberty which I assume when I throw my reflections on some recent work of yours into the old-fashioned form of a "Familiar Epistle to an Author." I have been reading with interest Dr. Tanner's *Studies in Spiritism*, with an Introduction by G. Stanley Hall, Ph.D., LL.D.<sup>1</sup> Your own contributions to what you style such a "searching, impartial, critical estimate" of the work of the English Society for Psychical Research as that Society has never enjoyed before,<sup>2</sup> attracted my particular attention. I do not disparage the performances of Miss Tanner, Ph.D., when I say that the work of the Master interested me even more than that of the impartial Disciple.

In all studies and in all discussions every man or woman who takes a part has a natural or artificial bias,—or plenty of both. My bias in the matter of Mrs. Piper and her performances is identical with your own. Thus you say, "we all have fathers, but somehow it seemed to me vulgar to hold the intercourse which I should love to" (hold?) "with my father's spirit in such a way as this," namely, through Mrs. Piper.<sup>3</sup>

I have elsewhere expressed precisely the same sentiments, to which I adhere.<sup>4</sup>

You write, "we dishonour our immortal parts" (or rather, perhaps, the immortal parts of our dead friends?) "by thinking

<sup>1</sup> D. Appleton and Co., London and New York, 1910. <sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* p. xxxiii.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.* p. xxviii.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Making of Religion*, chapter vii.

that we find them here";<sup>1</sup>—in Mrs. Piper's parlour! Your sentiments are mine: nothing could induce me to intrude on the denizens of the next world through the agency of Mrs. Piper, (whom I never met,) or of any other "entranced" medium, savage or civilised.

But Science must "do diverse and disgusting things" in the search for Truth, and you have done diverse and disgusting things to Mrs. Piper; prodding her with an esthesiometer, and filling her nostrils with camphor and ether; her mouth with sugar and salt, which she "took very unconcernedly," to quote Claverhouse (pp. 236-239). *Volenti non fit injuria*, you might also have exhibited snuff, and found out whether it made her "control" "Hodgson" sneeze or not. A scientific study of Mrs. Piper is one thing; serious consultation of the dead through Mrs. Piper is another, and, I agree with you, is a vulgar thing.

Thus far we are in accord; and, again, I am in a state of absolute agnosticism about Mrs. Piper's case: I can go further, I have never seen in the published reports any proof, for me, that she is in touch with even an off-current, so to speak, of the consciousness of any persons discarnate. Some of her performances puzzle me, for example the replies of her "Hodgson" to Professor William James, the answers of her "Mr. Myers" to questions on Roman mythology; and so forth.<sup>2</sup> I am puzzled; and, (here we approach the main point of my difficulty,) I am inclined to suppose that Mrs. Piper, *in her normal condition*, could not have given the replies which, as "Hodgson" and as "Myers," she did give to the questions of Mr. James and of Mr. Dorr. The abnormality of her condition seems, in some way, to help her, but is her condition, in fact, abnormal when she gives sittings?

We now reach the question to which your answers, in Dr. Tanner's book, appear to me, (excuse my frankness in a matter of Science,) to be so lacking in coherence as to resemble the utterances of "split personalities." Is Mrs. Piper, to your mind, when she gives a "sitting,"—when she is "entranced"—really *dans son assiette*, really in possession of her normal intelligence, and of her senses five? If so, she must be a

<sup>1</sup> *Studies in Spiritism*, p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> For these see *Proceedings S.P.R.*, Parts LVIII. and LX.

common forthright impostor (or strangely self-deceived by self-suggestion); for she says that she is "in trance"; that her normal consciousness is in abeyance; while, when restored to her normal consciousness, she retains no memory of what she said, did, and suffered while in trance. Such are her professions, and if, while seeming to be in trance, she is really in full persistent normal consciousness, she says what she knows to be—erroneous.

Is it a conceivable hypothesis that in her assumed "trance" she is normally conscious, but that she has suggested herself into so firm a belief in her own unconsciousness that, after the trance, she actually retains no memory of having been conscious? Has she successfully administered to herself a "post-hypnotic suggestion" not to remember things of which she was as conscious, in her "trance," as a hypnotised patient is conscious in his of what he is told to do or abstain from doing? If so she is

"So false she *wholly* takes herself for true."

If I had to wager, and if the wager could be decided, I would lay five to one that after her trance she really retains no memory of what occurred in it. That is only an impression for what it is worth. Nor is the analogy of a patient hypnotised by another person, close and exact; for *he*, it seems, can be hallucinated by the external suggestion, whereas, on the hypothesis which I indicate, Mrs. Piper is widely awake to the external world, but is hypnotised, by herself, into remembering nothing about it.

Perhaps you have some such solution of the problem in your mind when you doubt as to whether Mrs. Piper's "method be a conscious invention on her part," or "a method unconsciously drifted into" (p. xx). If you adhered firmly to this line of conjecture, and if it means that Mrs. Piper hypnotises herself by self-suggestion, and gives herself a "post-hypnotic suggestion" to forget, my only difficulty would be that I know not whether, in a hypnotic condition, a patient can be keenly conscious of every minute event. Your explanation, if I understand you, of some effects of Mrs. Piper which have astonished observers, and have been ascribed to "supernormal" influences, telepathic or spiritual, is that in

trance her sense of hearing is acute and vigilant; her powers of inference and observation and of normal memory exceedingly keen, and that thus she can amaze spectators by her statements. All this I am not disputing, but do you steadily maintain that her senses, and memory, and powers of deduction, in "trance," are normal, or perhaps even above the powers of her every-day intelligence?

On this all-important and very interesting question, you appear, if I may use a Shakespearian phrase, to "speak with two voices," and to hold irreconcilable opinions. I may very probably be mistaken: it is so easy and so natural to misunderstand an argument. I can only quote various statements of yours which, at present, I cannot reconcile.

Your contributions to Dr. Tanner's book, taken in the order in which they were obviously written, are "Current Notes by Dr. Hall" (pp. 259-273), the matter in pages 177-185, and the "Introduction" (pp. xv-xxxiii). As to your "Current Notes" you say that they were "jotted down with no thought of their publication, least of all in their present form" (*Introduction*, p. xxxiii). "Their present form," I presume, is the form in which they were originally written by you, while the impressions received by you from the "sittings" were fresh in your memory? Yet I am not certain on this point; the "jotted notes" are sarcastic and eloquent. "Are they tempting sirens that would lure us to our destruction, or are they angelic beckonings to a higher world?" This reads, does it not? like a passage of deliberate rhetoric, not like a jotting. Indeed the whole chapter has the air of being a studied composition. As evidence, it would be much more valuable, (according to the ideas of the Society for Psychological Research,) if it really were contemporary with the sittings; were really "a few notes on the Piper sittings jotted down with no thought of their publication, least of all in their present form" (p. xxxiii). Is the "present form" or is it not, the original form of the jotted notes? If not, the original notes are much to be desired.

Leaving the notes and the Introduction for a moment, we observe (p. 190) that "before Mrs. Piper entered the trance . . . Dr. Hall explained to her that we had no doubt at all about the genuineness of her trance or of her own honesty."

Now you confessedly thought it *de bonne guerre*, (and here I agree with you,) to deceive the entranced Mrs. Piper,—that is, the so-called “Hodgson,”—by saying the thing that was not; by “my involuted lie” (p. 179). I do not deem this a moral fib, but a scientific and experimental stratagem. But I suppose that, when you assured Mrs. Piper, in her ordinary state, of your belief in her “honesty” and in “the genuineness of her trance” you were not telling an “involuted lie.” I take this for granted.

The point that puzzles me is, do you still retain your belief in the “genuineness” of Mrs. Piper’s “trance”? Your remarks on this question, in your “Introduction” and “Current Notes” perplex me; partly because of the terminology which you employ: to this point I will return.

As to trance, genuine trance, it is fair to take it in the sense of Dr. Tanner’s definition. “Trance states are by no means the exclusive possession of mediums. They are common in hysterical subjects, and in cases of secondary personality, and can be produced by hypnosis or suggestion with proper subjects. While in the trance the victim is more or less unconscious of what is going on about her, and on recovering remembers her feelings more or less dimly. The state has many resemblances to somnambulism. Neither the causes nor cure of it are as yet well understood” (p. xxxvi). This I accept for the sake of argument.

If Mrs. Piper be “honest,”—as you told her you believed her to be,—in trance she is “more or less unconscious of what is going on about her.” She retains, she says, no memory of what was going on, after she wakens. But, if honest, she cannot tell, when she wakens, whether, when entranced, she was conscious of what was going on around her or not. When we say that we have had a dreamless sleep, we only mean that we retain no memory of having dreamed. In some cases it can be proved, by a bedfellow who heard us talking in our sleep, that we really did dream. If Mrs. Piper be dishonest, we cannot trust her report; if she be honest, her report is of no value, for she merely does not remember having been conscious of her environment: whether by self-suggestion or not.

We are thus dependent on *your* opinion as to the extent

of her normal consciousness of all, or of much, that passes in her room while she is entranced. Now I cannot discover what, in this matter, your opinion really is. (For my part, I have no opinion as to whether or not the "trance" is "genuine.") You say (p. xix) that the sitter has the impression that Mrs. Piper "is almost as much out of the game in this state as if she were dead." The sitters, therefore, at last come to talk quite freely, and your theory is that Mrs. Piper listens to even the faintest sounds, and tries to make her profit out of what she hears; for, you say, in fact, "her ear is awake and alert" (p. xix). If so, then Mrs. Piper's trance, (as far as I can understand,) is *not* genuine; for, following Dr. Tanner's definition, "in trance the victim is more or less unconscious of what is going on about her"; whereas you say that, at least often, she is acutely conscious even of things concealed, as when Mr. Dorr pretends to go out, opening and shutting the door, but slips back again (pp. 214-215).

As this is so, how could you tell Mrs. Piper that you believed in "the genuineness of her trance"? You believe no such matter, if you accept Dr. Tanner's very moderate definition of the amount of ordinary consciousness in trance. You write "it often seemed that only her eyes" (hidden in a cushion) "were out of the game, and *all*" (my italics) "her mental and emotional powers were very wide awake" (p. xx). But not only "her eyes were out of the game," for "general sensibility [is also] shunted out . . . and certainly her respiratory functions, taste, smell, general tactile sensibility and motor innervation are asleep" (p. 268).

On this showing a great deal of Mrs. Piper is certainly asleep; so a great deal of her trance is certainly genuine. Meanwhile her ears, or one of them, and all her mental and emotional powers were, on your showing, very wide awake. So far her trance is *not* genuine, nor is she honest. You add, "and yet I am by no means convinced that she acted her sleep-dream. . . ." (p. xx).

You know, as well as I, that in the dreams of sleep the sleeper is, at most, but faintly and erroneously conscious of the sounds in his environment, and that when such sounds give occasion to a dream, the dream dramatizes and misinterprets them out of all resemblance to the objective cause of the

hallucination. Mrs. Piper, on the other hand, you say, is, as regards her mental powers, "often very wide awake," in a "sleep-dream" which, none the less, you are not "convinced" that she feigns. Yet you *are* (apparently) convinced that she "acts" the "sleep-dream," for you are convinced that, "often at least her mental powers are very wide awake." Now, in sleep-dreams, as an all but universal rule, our "mental powers" are very remote from being "wide awake,"—we could not cheat, in a "sleep-dream," or try to cheat, observers who were watching us. Yet Mrs. Piper apparently tries to do nothing else.

You go on to give "abundant evidence,"—in the same page,—“that Mrs. Piper-Hodgson’s soul is awake and normal.” If by “soul” you mean Mrs. Piper’s ordinary intelligence, and if *that* be awake and *normal*, when she is acting the part of Hodgson, then she is not in a trance, as Dr. Tanner defines trance, and is an impostor; like Mr. Pickwick I will be more explicit and say “a humbug.” But then, that she *is* “acting her sleep-dream,” one of your split selves is “by no means convinced.” Like Malvolio, you “think nobly of the soul,” as our immortal part. If, when you speak of Mrs. Piper’s “soul” as “awake and normal” in her assumed trance, you mean, not her normal intelligence, but her “soul” in the Platonic sense, then you agree with Sir Thomas Browne. “There is something in us that is not in the jurisdiction of Morpheus . . . we are somewhat more than ourselves in our sleep; and the slumbering of the body seems but to be the wakening of the soul.” Perhaps that is what you mean? Perhaps you mean that, in trance, Mrs. Piper’s “soul,” or immortal part, is its true unconditioned self? But if you mean that, in trance, Mrs. Piper’s every-day intelligence “is awake and normal,” then, once more, you are quite convinced that,—often at least,—she “acts her sleep-dream”; for in “sleep-dreams” nobody’s every-day intelligence is “awake and normal.” Without banter, I am so perplexed by your statements of your opinion that an explanation will be welcome to an earnest inquirer.

If your position is that (p. xix) Mrs. Piper’s normal ear “is awake and alert,” keenly aware of everything audible, if her ear is on the catch for every whisper of external suggestion, if her normal ‘cuteness is watching for every opportunity to cheat,—if *this* be your opinion,—why do you express

a very different theory in your "Current Notes" on your six sittings with this

"Daughter of Debate,  
That discord still doth sow?"

In these notes (p. 265) you write: "Thus, the auditory centres were not asleep, but seemed in full function, and *at first* we thought that there was some hyperacuity, although we were not infrequently asked to repeat as if to keep up the illusion that the hand was hard of hearing. Yet here, too, *subsequent* observation suggests obtuseness and subnormality that, while the ear heard, it did so dimly and sleepily, or else tended to drop off into the slumber in which the eye and other orienting faculties were wrapped. On the whole we incline to the idea that, although we have here" (in Mrs. Piper's normal and very acute sense of hearing,) "the source of by far most of the information the control seems to possess that appears super-normal, that the ear itself in point of fact is not very wide awake, and most of the time is only a little above the middle state between sleeping and waking."

Here, sir, in apparent contradiction of what you say (p. xix) —"her ear is awake and alert,"—you write that, *at first*, this ear "seemed in full function," yet that, in fact, it was *not* in full function, *not* "alert," but "tended to drop off into the slumber,"—heard "dimly and sleepily," and so forth, and *most of the time* is only a little above the middle state between sleeping and waking," in which state we hear in the vaguest and most dislocated fashion. By your account "most of the time" Mrs. Piper's ear is *not* "awake and alert," and *not* on the catch for even whispered hints. We have here a clearly drawn and most important distinction between the impressions made on you by your earlier and your later studies of the alertness of Mrs. Piper's ear, or sense of hearing. Your "Current Notes," in which Mrs. Piper's ear hears "dimly and sleepily, or tended to drop off into slumber," were, or ought to have been, written under the vivid recent impression of your interviews with that lady. Have you "got them down in your notes"? Your Introduction, I presume, was written later, after the book of Miss Tanner, Ph.D., was finished. In your Introduction, all is changed, the ear has now become



"keen and alert." I know not how you could write this statement, if you remembered what you had written in your "Current Notes."

Your "searching, impartial, critical" estimate of Mrs. Piper has now been treated to an examination which I can honestly call "impartial." I do not wish to be captious: I am sincerely unable to understand why, in the conclusions of your Introduction you appear to forget what "later observation" taught you.

Your theory of what some reckon Mrs. Piper's successes seems to rest on the discovery that, when she is "entranced," her normal intelligence and her sense of hearing are at once extremely alert "*often*"; and yet, *usually*, or "*most of the time*," are somnolent and beclouded, "sleepy" and "dim."

I may have overlooked, I certainly have failed to discover, any mode of reconciling so many conclusions which to me look like contradictions in terms. But Dr. Tanner's conclusions "are in substantial agreement" with yours, and you are "satisfied and shall probably never want more sittings." Were I you, I should pine for more sittings in the hope of discovering whether I really thought that Mrs. Piper's ear is "keen and alert"; or, on the other hand, as "subsequent observation suggests," "heard dimly and sleepily, or else tended to drop off into the slumber in which the eye and other orienting faculties were wrapped" (p. 265). How can both of these conclusions be correct? Why do you express (pp. xix-xx) in your Introduction the conclusions which, as reported in your "Current Notes," subsequent observation proved to be mistaken? Conclusions which are apparently irreconcilably contradictory cannot be the basis of discussion.

The problem of determining the presence or absence of very wide-awake normal intelligence and keen sensitiveness to impressions in a person whose "general sensibility is shunted out," and whose "respiratory functions, taste, smell, general tactile sensibility and motor innervation are certainly asleep," (p. 268) is, of course, very difficult! If I understand you, Mrs. Piper can somehow "shunt out" all the faculties which she *does* shunt out, and yet "often" retain her normal intelligence, her powers of hearing, comparing, and inferring, while also "most of the time" her hearing is very somnolent and

therefore her inferences from what she dimly hears must be the vaguest of dreams.

Puzzled as every conscientious reader must be, one turns to the "Notes of the Sittings," pp. 166-258. Here, one hopes, will be found contemporary records of the general keen alertness, and of the usual somnolent inefficiency, of Mrs. Piper's normal sense of hearing.

The theory and method of the sittings is that Mrs. Piper, or her spiritual "control," can only hear what is spoken loud to her right hand, which the control dominates. Your theory is that (a) Mrs. Piper's ear has its normal powers of hearing; and, again, (b) that it has not. In the records taken during the sittings I find only the following notes which assert the reaction of Mrs. Piper, or of Hodgson, to sounds other than remarks shouted into her writing hand.

(1) p. 195. "Hodgson seems to break in, in response to some unnoted remark from Mr. Dorr." The remark of Mr. Dorr being "unnoted" we can say no more.

(2) p. 229. Dr. Tanner had said to Dr. Hall "with a laugh" that some undecipherable writing by Mrs. Piper "looked as if it might be the beginning of 'Hell and damnation.'" The writing hand remonstrated against what Dr. Tanner had said.

In this instance Mrs. Piper, or "Hodgson" certainly heard what Dr. Tanner said, with a laugh, about Hell and damnation. This is, I think, the only instance of such hearing which is not matter of presumption and conjecture.

(3) p. 229. A reference to Mr. Dorr's return to the room whence he had made a pretence of departing. It is inferred that Mrs. Piper heard some sound whence *she* inferred that a trick was being played.

(4) "We talked to each other a minute or so. *Presumably* the control heard, and went on" (p. 241). But nothing in the context suggests that "the control heard" your conversation.

(5) There followed (Fifth sitting) some futile attempts at experiments to detect Mrs. Piper's powers of hearing, and Dr. Tanner says "I whispered to Dr. Hall to try to fool the control... but I think that he heard me" (p. 243).

This is only a conjecture of Dr. Tanner's: the "control," in *these* experiments, was not always easily "fooled."

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(6) On p. 251 (Sixth sitting) several experiments on hearing are tried, and "doubtless the control heard, the first time the question was asked," but this is the common "doubtless" of science and means no more than that you prefer to suppose that the "control" heard the question.

(7) p. 256. A case of hearing what you and Dr. Tanner said to each other. What you said to each other involved an obvious misinterpretation of what Mrs. Piper (or "the control") had been saying to you, and "the control" kept insisting on his own opinion.

I can only find, as contemporary records of the acute hearing of Mrs. Piper in trance, these few cases, conjectures, and presumptions.

Of the somnolence of the ear, "most of the time," I find no contemporary record.

To return to the contrast between your scanty contemporary notes of your guesses that Mrs. Piper hears acutely in "trance," on one side, and your large general assertion, on the other, that her hearing is acute, you say (p. 264), "The left ear is certainly awake, because, over and over, murmured words between those present, steps, rustles, laughs, and many other noises are heard and reacted to, sometimes unexpectedly, by the writer."

Where are your contemporary records of these many "reactions"? You give to the general reader your large assertion on p. 264, lines 1-5. You contradict it (as far as I can understand you) on page 265, and all the exact evidence you offer for the assertion on page 264 is your "doubtless," your "I think," your "presumably," with one or two certainties. Yet on your theory of Mrs. Piper's acute hearing, you base your theory of her alleged successes: surely there ought to be more proofs both of the vigilance and of the somnolence of her sense of hearing.

Once more, you are singularly inattentive to your own contemporary reports of your six sittings. At the Fourth, after you had told your "involved lies" to "Hodgson," Hodgson said "I am interested in seeing how many stories you can tell in a minute. They (*sic*) awfully bad. They are awful whoppers" (p. 228). In the Sixth sitting (p. 255), Hodgson says "I have felt so keenly your various whoppers all this

time... I think I told you so before." (The dates of sittings are not given.)

Your report, incredible as it seems, actually goes on: "which he certainly had not, having been trustful to the point of credulity." Thus, when you reach page 255, you have forgotten, beyond recall even by your proof sheets, what you had chronicled on page 228,—namely, "Hodgson's" detection and denunciation of your "awful whoppers." You do not remember all this even when "Hodgson" (p. 255) says, "I think I told you so before." You reply "which he certainly had not." Yet he had! Poor "Hodgson's" memory is much better than yours and Dr. Tanner's combined. It is *you* who here "display the inability that we should expect from a secondary personality..."

These notes deal only with the method and logic of your contributions to the book of Dr. Tanner. Concerning Mrs. Piper, it is my opinion that if it were possible to put her fleshly ears out of action, without in any way injuring these organs, "Hodgson," Rector and Co. would be deaf, and, of course, could not answer questions which could not reach them, unless by dint of telepathy between the quick and the dead. If these spirits replied, and replied correctly, to questions asked *mentally* by the sitters, their case would be much stronger, though, of course, not a crucial test. "Nevertheless the experiment ought to be made by some competent person," writes Sir Oliver Lodge. When physical hearing has been put out of action, then sitters need not shout, they may put their questions mentally. But till these conditions are secured, I venture to think that experiments with Mrs. Piper are nugatory.

I remain,

Your obedient servant,

A. LANG.