

'WILLIAM CROOKES TO CHARLES BLACKBURN':

ANOTHER LETTER

by M. H. COLEMAN

INTRODUCTION

SOME time ago I purchased a bound collection of off-prints of articles by William Crookes; these were subsequently reprinted by James Burns as *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism*, London (1874). The volume contained various newspaper-cuttings relating to Crookes, and pasted to the front free end-paper, a holograph letter from Crookes to Charles Blackburn, discussing the mediumship of Florence Cook. In view of W. H. Salter's comment (1) 'there is no single episode of more crucial importance than the series of sittings held by Crookes with Florence Cook', it seemed desirable that this letter should be published.*

For those unfamiliar with the background to Crookes's investigation of Florence Cook, it may be said that Charles Blackburn was a wealthy Manchester Spiritualist who made Florence Cook an allowance for acting as medium at a series of seances held for the investigation of Spiritualist phenomena. In December 1873 a sitter named Volckman claimed to have detected Florence personating a materialised spirit called 'Katie King' (2). Crookes was then asked to take charge of the investigation, and in a series of letters (3, 4, 5) to 'The Spiritualist', he claimed to have established the genuine character of Florence's phenomena and in particular, the independent existence of 'Katie King'. In April 1874 Florence married a Captain Corner; and although Crookes continued to attend Florence's seances, he published no further account of his investigations. In the following year Mrs Crookes published a letter (6) describing phenomena she had witnessed at sittings with Florence; notably the appearance of a materialised spirit called 'Leila'. Florence continued to give seances at intervals, until her death in 1904: but she was apparently exposed in fraud on several occasions (7, 8, 9). Later in life Crookes insisted (10) that he had nothing to retract from the published accounts of his psychical investigations. Some time after the conclusion of Crookes's investigation, Blackburn discontinued his allowance to Florence,

* Dr Coleman has kindly presented a photocopy of this letter to the Society's archives.

and turned his attention to her younger sister, Kate, who also acted as a medium.

HALL'S THEORY

In 1962 T. H. Hall published a book (11) on Crookes's investigation of Florence Cook, in which he argued that not only were Florence's phenomena fraudulent, but that Crookes, from his privileged position in charge of the investigation must have been aware of this, and had actually assisted in the deception. Hall sought to explain Crookes's dishonesty by suggesting that Florence was Crookes' mistress at this time; and that the public endorsement of her phenomena was the price Crookes paid for her private favours. Hall argued that, following the Volckman exposure, Florence wished to use Crookes's testimony to restore Blackburn's confidence in her mediumistic powers, and thus secure the continuance of her allowance. Hall subsequently extended his argument (12) to include the letter written by Mrs Crookes (6), which he suggested Florence had demanded of Crookes, in payment of past favours: and Crookes in turn demanded it of his wife, as the price of avoiding a public scandal. Hall also suggested that the letter from Mrs Crookes would allay Blackburn's suspicions of an intrigue between Florence and Crookes. In Hall's version of subsequent events, neither Crookes's testimony, nor his wife's, succeeded in restoring Blackburn's faith in Florence, who transferred both his interest, and his money, to her sister Kate. Thereafter Hall considered (13) that Blackburn continued to regard both Florence and Crookes with hostility.

The principal item of evidence advanced by Hall in favour of his theory is a statement made by F. R. H. Anderson, first to Mrs Goldney (14), and subsequently to several officials of the S.P.R. (15) in 1949. (A statement made by Anderson (14) in confidence to E. J. Dingwall in 1922 is so brief that it can scarcely be considered relevant to the present discussion.) In the final version (15) of his statement Anderson said that Florence (Corner) had been his mistress in 1892-93, and during their association, she had told him she had previously been Crookes's mistress. She also told him that her mediumistic activities had been fraudulent, performed in collusion with Crookes, who had assisted her because of their private relationship. Hall also adduced three near-contemporary publications by J. E. Jones (16), by C. M. Davies (17) and by J. N. Maskelyne (18), and the later testimony of Jules Bois (19, 20, 21) as supporting his argument. Bois, like Anderson, said that he had had an affair with Florence, during which she had told him that her phenomena were fraudulent.

CROOKES'S LETTER

The text of Crookes's letter is as follows:

Queens Hotel
Leeds
October 14, 1875

Dear Mr Blackburn,

Your letter of the 11th inst. has followed me here. I understand from it that you are likely to pass through London next Tuesday morning. I hope to be at home by that time. If I am not Mrs Crookes will be at home and will be very pleased to see you. I cannot but feel that your decision about Florrie is right. Her friends *cannot* help her now, however wishful they might be to do so. Thanks to your generosity to her we have had two years good experimenting with her mysterious powers and although much remains to be done, we have accomplished more than anyone else, and have added to the stock of human knowledge. With kind regards to Mrs and Miss Blackburn and yourself. Believe me very sincerely yours.

William Crookes

INFERENCES FROM CROOKES'S LETTER

It seems clear from the tone of this letter that in spite of Hall's contention to the contrary (13), Blackburn and Crookes were on good terms at this time; and far from Crookes being ranged with Florence against Blackburn, he was actually concurring in Blackburn's condemnation of her. It seems unlikely that if Crookes had been Florence's lover and accomplice he would have risked siding with Blackburn against her.

It is also apparent from this letter that the estrangement between Blackburn and Florence was not on Crookes's account: it was obviously something which Florence herself had done that decided Blackburn to withdraw his support. This had evidently occurred in the Autumn of 1875; and there is no reason whatever to connect it with the Crookes seances of the previous year.

The fact that Crookes was happy for his wife to entertain Blackburn in his absence would seem to cast serious doubt on the idea that Mrs Crookes's letter concerning 'Leila' was a complete fabrication, unwillingly concocted by her, at her husband's insistence.

OTHER EVIDENCE RECONSIDERED

Hall has asserted (22) that the Anderson testimony is not essential to his case that Crookes was involved in Florence Cook's fraudulent activities. But he has admitted (23) that the only conceivable explanation for the infamous conduct which he had attributed to Crookes, would be a sexual liaison with the medium: and Anderson's statements constitute the principal evidence for the occurrence of this liaison. It is clear from the arguments which both Hall (24) and Dingwall (25) have advanced for the reliability of Anderson's memory, that they regard his statements as of major importance in the case against Crookes. In fact Anderson's references to 'spirit photographs' taken by ultraviolet light in connection with the Crookes seances, show that his memory of things he had been told half a century before *was* confused. Thouless (26, 27) has illustrated serious discrepancies between the three versions of Anderson's statement: and it might be noted here that Anderson's vivid account of his seduction to Mrs Goldney (14), does not agree with his final version (15). Dingwall's memory in 1966 (25) of what Anderson told him in 1922 may be clear; but his contemporary note contains no reference to Crookes being involved in fraud. The additional detail in each successive version of Anderson's story may well represent the incorporation of material suggested to him (perhaps unconsciously), as Thouless (26) has suggested.

The discussion of the reliability of Anderson's memory should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the source of Anderson's story was Florence Cook herself. Since it is central to Hall's thesis that she was a cheat and a liar, it is obviously necessary to ask for more than her word (and that at second-hand) before concluding that a distinguished scientist aided her in fraud, and then published false reports of his supposed investigations. Hall (28) disparages those who adduce Crookes's scientific eminence as an argument against his involvement in fraud and false reporting: but the publication of deliberately falsified data is a peculiarly heinous crime for a professional scientist.

Hall has claimed (29) that the Bois testimony represents independent evidence for the truth of Anderson's story: but the fact is that both are derived from the same source, *viz* Florence Cook. The agreement (in so far as they do agree) of the accounts given by Anderson and Bois merely establishes that Florence told a similar story on more than one occasion: it adds nothing to the story's reliability. In fact Hall (21) does not reproduce the longer version of the Bois testimony (20) which explicitly exonerates

Crookes from involvement in the fraud: 'the famous Florence Cook, (now Mrs Corner) who splendidly duped the distinguished William Crookes with the phantom of "Katie King".' Similarly Hall paraphrases Flammarion's account of what D. D. Home had told him (30): and again omits Home's observation, "Miss Cook was only a skilful trickster, and had shamefully deceived the eminent scientist.' (31)

Medhurst and Goldney (32) have indicated grounds for caution in accepting the anonymous evidence quoted by C. M. Davies (17) at its face value. However that may be, it is clear that Hall has misrepresented Davies when he writes, "The statement by Dr Davies that Mr Crookes had "gone in" for Florence Cook's "double" could bear only one interpretation and that was that, in the language of today, he had "fallen for" Florence Cook herself' (33). In fact Davies wrote (34) "The Professor acted all the time as Master of the Ceremonies, retaining his place at the aperture; and I fear, from the very first, exciting suspicion by his marked attentions, not to the medium, but to the ghost. When it did come it was arrayed according to orthodox ghost fashion, in loose white garments, and I must confess, with no resemblance to Miss C.' Davies suggested (34) that the ghost on this occasion was probably a 'brawny servant girl'; which makes Crookes's behaviour difficult to explain, if he were engaged in a passionate love-affair with Florence at this time. As to the construction Hall seeks (35) to put upon Davies's reference (17) to 'an infant phenomenon', there is nothing to connect Florence Cook or Crookes with Brighton; but the date, place and term 'infant phenomenon' all indicate the 'spirit-writing' episode of the Jencken baby (36).

Of Maskelyne's remarks (18) it is perhaps sufficient to observe that he had no first-hand experience of the events which he describes: and for his account of Florence's mediumship he draws largely upon Davies's book (17). His comments upon Crookes are obviously derived from his opinion of Crookes's account of 'Katie King's' beauty; and as such, are of no particular significance in themselves. In any case he was clearly not of the opinion that Crookes was party to the fraud which he imputes to Florence Cook, since he writes (37) 'Mr Crookes puts forward his "proofs" so ingenuously, with such an air of good faith, that one might be startled if we did not know how easily the gentleman can be hood-winked.'

In assessing the significance of J. Enmore Jones' remarks (16) about Crookes's conduct of the seance which he attended, there are two factors which emerge from his letter, which must be taken into account. First, the seance was *not* a test-seance, held for the

purpose of investigation, but merely to provide the twenty-four (!) sitters present with an opportunity to say farewell to 'Katie King'. Second, Jones was obviously put out at being prevented, by a comparative newcomer like Crookes, from putting questions to 'Katie', which, from his twenty years of experience in Spiritualism, he considered to be important. This latter consideration may well have caused Jones to be over-emphatic in his criticism of Crookes's behaviour: whilst the former robs Hall's criticism (38) of Crookes's unscientific conduct of this seance of much of its point.

Hall has suggested (39) that the final 'Katie King' seances were transferred from Crookes's laboratory in Mornington Road to Florence's home in Hackney to facilitate the introduction of a confederate, and thus permit Florence and 'Katie' to be seen simultaneously. But it may be asked, if Crookes were involved in the deception, why should the transfer have been necessary? The simultaneous appearance of Florence and 'Katie' would have been much more convincing in the apparently strict conditions prevailing in Crookes's laboratory, than in Florence's bedroom. Davies was prepared to print (34) an explicit statement that the Hackney bedroom provided access for the entry of a confederate. If Crookes had been Florence's accomplice, it would not have been very difficult to introduce a confederate with his connivance; and a result obtained at Mornington Road would have been much more impressive than the same result obtained at Hackney.

SUMMARY

Hall has written (40) 'there are three alternative (*sic*) possibilities in regard to the mediumship of Florence Cook, and Crookes's involvement with it.'

- (i) The phenomena were genuine.
- (ii) The phenomena were fraudulent, but Crookes was deceived.
- (iii) The phenomena were fraudulent, and Crookes was party to the deception.

He dismisses the first possibility on the grounds of Florence's exposure in fraud, on a number of occasions (2, 7, 8, 9), of her association with fraudulent mediums, and of certain suspicious circumstances observed at her seances. He rejects the second possibility on the grounds that Crookes's privileged position, in charge of the seances, made it impossible for him to be deceived. He therefore concludes that the seances were fraudulent, that Crookes was aware of this, and aided in the deception.

It seems fairly certain that Florence *was* exposed on several

occasions, and for many people this will be sufficient to regard all of her phenomena as entirely fraudulent. However, it is not the purpose of the present paper to evaluate the status of Florence Cook's mediumship, but merely to consider whether, if it were fraudulent, Crookes must be regarded as implicated in the fraud. It is difficult to imagine any motive for Crookes's participation, other than a sexual involvement with Florence; although S. G. Soal suggested (41) long ago that Crookes may have been infatuated with 'Katie King', without any suggestion of his being involved in Florence's deceptions.

However, the inferences drawn above from Crookes's letter, are at variance in a number of particulars with the sequence of events T. H. Hall has envisaged in support of his theory that Crookes was a party to Florence's fraudulent activities. Anderson's story of what he thought he remembered Florence told him fifty years before, is so obviously unsatisfactory as it stands, that it is scarcely necessary to point out it is based on the bedroom gossip of a woman lacking normal moral restraints. Of the quotations from Maskelyne and Bois, it is only necessary to point out that their common opinion that Crookes was deceived, has been omitted in each case. The quotations from Jones and Davies, when restored to their respective contexts do not provide evidence for a passionate liaison between Crookes and Florence Cook, which is such an essential link in Hall's argument.

If Florence's mediumship is regarded as fraudulent, and the evidence for her having been Crookes' mistress is seen to be unsatisfactory, the second of Hall's possibilities becomes the likeliest explanation of the events of Crookes's investigation. It may seem unlikely today, that Crookes should have been deceived by the rather unsophisticated tricks revealed in the exposures of materialisation phenomena; but there are several factors which probably contributed to his deception. First, he was predisposed to a belief in Spiritualistic phenomena (42), partly no doubt from his earlier experiences with D. D. Home (43). Second, he had a high opinion of his own acumen, and resented criticism; once he had made up his mind on the subject of the Spiritual, he was likely to be less cautious than the conditions of the investigation required. Third, he had very poor eyesight, such that his contemporary, Sir William Ramsay, remarked, 'He's so short-sighted that, despite his unquestioned honesty, he cannot be trusted in what he tells you he has seen' (44). It does not seem intrinsically more improbable that Crookes was deceived by Florence Cook, than that Hare (45), or De Morgan (46) or Zöllner (47) were deceived during their respective investigations.

No attempt has been made here to detail the numerous points which conflict with Hall's theory of the Crookes investigation, which have been raised, particularly by Medhurst and Goldney (48, 49), Thouless (26, 27), Barnard (50) and others. But when these are considered, together with the material discussed here, it appears that Hall's case against Crookes has been constructed by a very selective assembly of the evidence. Consideration of all the available evidence strongly suggests that if there was deception, Crookes himself was deceived.

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