

# THE CORNHILL



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JOHN MURRAY, 50 ALBEMARLE STREET, LONDON, W.1

1957

*Hamilton on Volcanoes*

the perpetual fluctuation of everything. The whole art is, really, to live all the *days* of our life, and not, with anxious care, disturb the sweetest hour that life affords—which is, the present. Admire the Creator and all his works, to us incomprehensible; do all the good you can upon earth; and take the chance of Eternity without dismay.'

It was to some purpose that he had read his Horace, and he could claim to have lived according to his precepts.

Hamilton did not forget his promise, and was buried beside his gentle first wife at Slebeck, on the estuary of Milford Haven, near to the house where, as a young man, he had begun life with her. Not three years after the death of his friend, Nelson lay in state at Greenwich, honoured with a nation's acclaim for his victory at Trafalgar. Charles Greville lived but a short time to enjoy his estate; and only Emma survived, precariously, until a few months before Waterloo.

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# CORNHILL



AUTUMN 1957

With **BETTY MILLER**  
**DESMOND NEILL**  
**HELENE DUBOIS**  
**LALAGE PULVERTAFT**  
**V. C. CLINTON-BADDELEY**

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### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

DESMOND NEILL has travelled and worked in the Far East, first in the Colonial Service, now in business in Singapore. His life in China is described in *Elegant Flower* (John Murray).

BETTY MILLER'S novels include *A Room in Regent's Park*, *On the Side of the Angels*, *The Death of the Nightingale* (Robert Hale). Her biographical work includes *Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Miss Mitford*, and *Robert Browning: A Portrait* (John Murray).

HELENE DUBOIS, poet, writes in the French language. This is the first appearance anywhere of this story, and the first time her work has appeared in translation in this country. Her collection of verses, *Tentation*, won the *Prix Verhaeren*, and this was followed by a further collection, *Plage*.

J. J. CURLE, editor and translator, has written verses and short stories.

LALAGE PULVERTAFT served in the W.R.N.S., took degrees at Cambridge in Archaeology, Anthropology and Egyptology. She has published two novels: *No Great Magic* and *The Thing Desired* (Secker & Warburg).

V. C. CLINTON-BADDELEY successively Don, Modern History Editor of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, actor, broadcaster, producer at the Bristol Old Vic and part-author of *Nichero*, *The Pride of the Regiment*, *Jolly Roger* (French). His books include *Words for Music* (C.U.P.), *The Burlesque Tradition in the English Theatre since 1660* (Methuen), and *All Right on the Night* (Putnam).

although political parties have yet to be clearly defined and loyalties properly focused, nowhere have I seen or sensed the frustration and disillusionment which in 1949 handed China over to the Communists.

On more than one occasion, I have tried to reconcile the artistry and gentle politeness, so evident to the newcomer in Japan, with the stories of brutality and savagery recounted by those who suffered in Bataan, Singapore and the Burmese jungle. It is an enigma that to me remains unresolved. Please excuse ; maybe a longer sojourn might explain.

## *The Séance at Ealing*

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### A Study in Memory and Imagination

BY BETTY MILLER

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ONE evening, late in July, 1855, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Browning, who had recently arrived in London from Italy, drove out to Ealing to meet a young man called Daniel Dunglas Home. Home, too, had recently arrived in London. His reputation, however, had preceded him. No sooner was he installed at Cox's Hotel, in Jermyn Street, than he found titled women vying with one another for the privilege of offering him hospitality. Before very long, the powers of the young American medium were the talk of the town. It was to escape for a time from the stress of London society that Home had retired to the rural calm of Ealing, where he lived quietly in the house of a wealthy solicitor called John Rymer. And it was here, in the midst of this tranquil family atmosphere, in a house whose french windows opened onto green lawns and leafy trees, that Robert Browning saw for the first time the man who was to inspire in him a notorious and all-absorbing enmity.

The poet recorded his impressions of Home while they were still fresh.

'Mr. H. [he wrote] says that he is "twenty," but very properly adds, that he looks much older—he declares that he has "no strength at all" . . . and affects the manners, endearments and other peculiarities of a very little child indeed—speaking of Mr. and Mrs. Rymer as his "Papa and Mama," and kissing the family abundantly—he professes timorousness, "a love of love"—and is

### The Séance at Ealing

unpleasant enough in it all—being a well-grown young man of over the average height, and, I should say, of quite the ordinary bodily strength—his face is rather handsome and prepossessing, and indicative of intelligence,—and I observed nothing offensive or pretentious in his demeanour beyond the unmanlinesses I mention, which are in the worst taste.’

Already, it will be seen, an obscure but very patent resentment mingles with the overt attempt to be objective and fair; a conflict no less evident in the description of the séance which Browning wrote on his return to Dorset Street. This account is contained in a letter written to a Mrs. Kinney, an American friend who had privately asked Robert Browning for a frank impression of Home and his ‘manifestations.’ It is an important letter, not only because it gives a detailed account of what actually took place at the famous séance, but also because it is the only document which has, unmistakably, the sense of immediacy upon it. This letter—it is now in the library of Yale University—was dashed off, rapidly and impatiently, less than forty-eight hours after the Brownings’ return from Ealing. It is perhaps the longest letter that the poet ever wrote. In it, he describes, in detail, the items in Daniel Home’s occult repertoire, and records his own reaction to the spectacle.

Very soon after the famous séance began, Robert Browning saw two manifestations which surprised and puzzled him. The first of these was the sudden up-rearing of the table, during which time the table-cloth, the ornaments, and a heavy lamp all remained in their places, unaffected by the commotion. ‘I don’t know at all,’ Browning confessed, ‘how the thing was done.’ A little later, something else—trivial, but no less inexplicable—disturbed him: at one moment, he saw Elizabeth’s dress, near the waist, ‘slightly but distinctly uplifted in a manner I cannot account for—as if by some object inside—which could hardly have been introduced without her becoming aware of it. This,’ he added, ‘was repeated’: it remained, none the less, inexplicable. Nor was he able to understand the mechanism whereby a hand, as he said, ‘appeared from the edge of the table, opposite to my wife and myself; was withdrawn, reappeared and moved about, rose and sank—it was clothed in white loose folds, like

### Betty Miller

muslin, down to the table’s edge—from which it was never separated—then another hand, larger, appeared, pushed a wreath, or pulled it, off the table, picked it from the ground, brought it to my wife . . . and put it on her head.’ (When this celebrated episode was later described by Home in the *Spiritualist Magazine*, shortly after the publication of *Mr. Sludge, the Medium*, Home added: ‘Mr. Browning seemed much disappointed that the wreath was not put upon his own head instead of his wife’s’—a remark which caused G. K. Chesterton to add that the idea of Robert Browning ‘running about the room after a wreath in the hope of putting his head into it, is one of the genuine gleams of humour in this foolish affair.’)

Although they offered him no wreath, Browning was not, however, wholly neglected by the spirits on this occasion. He found himself, as he said, ‘touched several times under the table on one knee and the other,—and on my hands alternately’ by what he describes, disquietingly, as ‘a kind of soft and fleshy pat.’ Soon after this, at the suggestion of the spirits, there was an interval in the proceedings. A quarter of an hour elapsed, and the guests returned to the room. The spirits now engaged (assisted, as they sensibly explained, by four strong spirits) to lift the table so that the poet could see the process for himself. There was light in the room, according to Browning; and by this light he was allowed to make his own investigations, unimpeded. The fact is put on record. ‘I looked under the table,’ Browning wrote, ‘and can aver that it was lifted from the ground, say a foot high, more than once—Mr. Home’s hands being plainly above it.’

After describing other phenomena—which included the mysterious playing of an accordion by invisible hands—Browning summed up his impressions. He was honest enough to add, in conclusion: ‘I don’t in the least pretend to explain how the table was *uplifted altogether* . . . and how my wife’s gown was agitated—nor how the accordion was played.’ Throughout the séance, indeed, despite his own growing hostility, he was at pains to behave with overt decorum—to comply with his host’s instructions that the guests should put no questions to the spirits, nor desire to see anything other than what the spirits might please to show them. ‘I treated “the spirits”,’ Browning wrote, ‘with the forms and courtesies observed by the others, and in no

respect impeded the "development" by expressing the least symptom of unbelief.'

This, then, is Browning's account of the affair, fresh from the happenings themselves, and before hostility to Home had hardened and become organised. 'I dare say,' the poet added in conclusion, 'my wife will give you her own account which differs from mine in all respects; so are we constituted.' Elizabeth's account, addressed, not to Mrs. Kinney, but to her sister Henrietta, in Taunton, not only differed in all respects from Browning's, it was written nearly a month later. She, too, describes the music, the raps, the lifting of the table, the spirit hands, and the placing of the wreath on her brow. 'For my own part,' she wrote, 'I am confirmed in all my opinions. To me, it was wonderful and conclusive; and I believe that the medium present was no more *responsible* for the things said and done, than I myself was.'

The division between husband and wife on the subject of spiritualism was now, less than a month after the séance, total. This schism is confirmed by the existence of two letters, one from Robert, the other from Elizabeth, written on the same day, and despatched in the same envelope. The letters were sent to a Miss de Gaudrian, who had written to ask the couple's opinion of the 'spiritual manifestations' seen at Ealing. Elizabeth's reply repeats word for word the belief in Home's integrity which she had already expressed to her sister. Browning's imperious note, written in the third person, reveals, not only how deep the rift had become between husband and wife, but how far Browning himself had travelled from his own early, and comparatively unprejudiced impressions of the séance. Despite the formality of the note, the tone is so brusque and emotional, that it is difficult not to believe that Browning was addressing, not Miss de Gaudrian alone, but also that obstinate, deluded and beloved woman, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, his wife.

Here are some extracts from this curious letter.

'Mr. Browning did, in company with his wife, witness Mr. Home's performances at Ealing on the night Miss de Gaudrian alludes to—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. Mr. Browning believes in the sincerity and good faith of the Rymer family, and regrets proportionately that benevolent and worthy people should be subjected to the consequences of those admirable qualities of benevolence and worth when unaccompanied by a grain of worldly wisdom. . . . Mr. Browning has, however, abundant experience that the best and rarest of natures may begin by the proper mistrust of the more ordinary results of reasoning when employed in such investigations as these; go on to an abnegation of the regular tests of truth and rationality in favour of these particular experiments, and end in a voluntary prostration of the whole intelligence before what is assumed to transcend all intelligence. Once arrived at this point, no trick is too gross. . . . Mr. Browning. . . recommends leaving this business to its natural termination, and will console himself for any pain to the dupes by supposing that their eventual profit in improved intelligence would be no otherwise procurable.'

It is a far cry from the wary, but tolerant attitude of the first letter, and reveals how acute the conflict had become between July 23, when the séance took place, and August 30, when this second letter was written. This conflict was to envenom, for Browning, the whole subject of the occult: it continued to do so for the rest of his life. The antipathy to spiritualism requires no apology. Browning's attitude to Home is manifestly more complex. Home was young enough to be his son: that fact alone seems to have aroused an initial and inexplicable resentment. He was a charlatan, he believed; and a charlatan, moreover, who effortlessly, in a single evening, had won the enduring admiration and allegiance of Elizabeth Browning. The ascendancy thus gained, Robert found, was unshakable: however fiercely, in the years to come, he might strive, as he put it, 'with the utmost of my soul's strength' to wean Elizabeth from Home, he was unable to do so. Home lurked, thereafter, a silent but omnipresent shadow on the domestic hearth—as, no doubt, the writer in the *Spiritualist Magazine* suspected, when, after the publication of *Mr. Sludge*, he sweetly enquired: 'What can poor Sludge have done to the poet, for . . . the poet must surely have some personal injury to resent?'

Personal injury there indeed was: nor can there be any doubt that it was the knowledge of this intimate failure which finally inflamed Browning's hostility to the medium, and which later led him, where Home was concerned, into that very 'abnegation of the regular tests of truth and rationality' which he had once so loudly deplored in the admirers of Home himself.

A year later, after what was to be, for Elizabeth, her last visit to England, the Brownings returned to Florence. There, they were visited one summer evening in 1858 by Nathaniel Hawthorne and his wife. 'There was a conversation about spirits,' Mrs. Hawthorne afterwards wrote, 'and a marvellous story was told of two hands that crowned Mrs. Browning with a wreath through the mediumship of Mr. Home. Mr. Browning declared that he believed the two hands were made by Home and fastened to Mr. Home's toes, and that he made them move by moving his feet.' It is possible that this was indeed the case: but Browning saw no evidence of the fact at Ealing. The trick, nevertheless, is foisted upon Sludge, who, with his 'lithe' young limbs, is able effectively, not only to 'play the glove At end o' your slipper,' but 'to turn, shove, tilt a table. . .' Conveniently, it seems, Browning had forgotten the fact that he had once looked under a table, and seen it rise from the ground, unassisted by human hand or foot.

In June, 1861, Elizabeth Barrett Browning died. Very soon after, Robert left Florence, and with his son, Pen, returned to England. He took a house in Warwick Crescent, overlooking the canal, his home for the next twenty-five years, and there he finished correcting the proofs of a new volume of poems. Conspicuous amongst these, was a poem in blank verse, called *Mr. Sludge, the Medium*. The book, *Dramatis Personae*, was published on May 26, 1864. A few weeks later, the poet William Allingham called on Robert Browning at Warwick Crescent. As was his habit, Allingham recorded the ensuing conversation in his diary. 'Sludge is Home the Medium,' he wrote, 'of whom Browning told me to-day a good deal that was very amusing. Having witnessed a séance of Home's, at the house of a friend of Browning's, Browning was openly called upon to give his frank opinion of what had passed, in presence of Home and the company, upon which, he declared with emphasis that so impudent a piece

of imposture he never saw before in all his life, and so took his leave.'

Out of context, a verse of Browning's springs to mind.

Oh, Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find!  
I can hardly misconceive you, it would prove me deaf and blind;  
But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!

A heavy mind, indeed; for we have Browning's written word for it, not only that he was allowed, freely, at one point, to make his own investigations, but that he 'in no respect impeded the "development" by expressing the least symptom of unbelief.' Admittedly, nine years had elapsed since the disastrous doings at Ealing: Browning's memory may have become a trifle blurred, and Allingham himself unwittingly, perhaps, contributed to the distortion. However strong his hatred of Home, Browning, needless to say, would not knowingly have told a lie. What had happened is that, by an emotional sleight-of-hand which successfully deceived its own author, the wish had finally been permitted to become father to the thought.

In 1889, Robert Browning died in Venice. Thirteen years later, Frank Podmore published a book called *Modern Spiritualism*. In this, he stated that Browning had personally explained to F. W. Myers, one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research, that he had never detected Home cheating, and that the only definite evidence he could show for his opinion that Home was an impostor was based on a second-hand rumour that Home was once caught in Italy experimenting with phosphorus. A reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* quoted that statement. He compared it with the words of—I quote—'an eminent living writer who has assured the world in print that Mr. Browning distinctly informed him that he did catch Home out in a vulgar fraud. What,' added the reviewer, 'can anyone make of such evidence?' What indeed? But there was more to come. A week later, on December 5, 1902, a letter from Pen Browning appeared in the same journal. The little Penini of Casa Guidi days, whom Hawthorne described as 'so slender, fragile and spirit-like . . . as if he had nothing to do with human flesh and blood,' was now, in his fifties, a tubby man with a bald head and a round beef-red face, very fond of the company of women and horses. Pen's main intention

*The Séance at Ealing*

in writing, he asserted, was to defend his mother by insisting that, before the end of her life, her views on spiritualism had been sensibly modified. In the act of defending his mother, however, he gave a sharp, inadvertent knock to the reputation of his father. 'Mr. Hume,' he wrote, 'who subsequently changed his name to Home, was detected "in a vulgar fraud," for I have heard my father repeatedly describe how he caught hold of his foot under the table.'

Note: repeatedly. The wheel has come full circle: fantasy is now inextricably confounded with fact. For that it is fantasy and not fact, Browning's own words abundantly prove. On no other occasion, moreover, save on July 23, 1855, did Browning and Home meet face to face at a séance. Nor can there be any doubt that if Browning had indeed caught Home in the act of cheating, he would triumphantly have proclaimed the fact in his letters to Mrs. Kinney and Miss de Gaudrian alike. He did not do so, because nothing of the sort took place. But resentment continued sullenly to smoulder over the years, bursting, on one notable occasion, into overt conflagration, when, weary of the sight of Home's dusty spirit-wreath hanging still, on his wife's dressing-table, Robert Browning seized it and flung it out of the window, a gesture that simultaneously relieved his feelings and cleared the way for the writing of *Mr. Sludge, the Medium*. This long and acrid poem was composed during the last years of Elizabeth's life and never shown to her. At the close of it, Sludge, exposed and humiliated, tries to salve his own vanity by deciding how best to tell the story to his own ultimate advantage.

You're satisfied at last? You've found out Sludge?

We'll see that presently: my turn, sir, next!

I, too, can tell my story . . .

I, too, can tell my story . . . Who is speaking—Mr. Sludge, the Medium—or Robert Browning?

*Summer's Lease*

BY HELENE DUBOIS

Translated by J. J. Curle

MY name is Madeleine Rozier. At the time of which I write people called me Maddie, and I was seventeen.

One June evening I was hurrying towards my great-uncle Marshall's house, La Forestière, where I spent part of my summer holidays each year. I had been out roaming about in the woods with André the young gamekeeper and I was thinking that if they had heard at La Forestière the two shots fired by a poacher—one at a roe deer and one at us—my great-aunt Lucy would be in a terrible state. Hearing her voice calling me in the distance I said to myself, "This is going to mean trouble," and ran down the narrow path that offered a short cut, leaving André standing in the middle of the road trying more or less successfully to swallow his anger. He still stood in the very attitude of trying to sweep me into his arms to kiss me, and at the moment of leaving him there had been a "goodnight, Miss!" which he intended for irony but which had sounded so ridiculously coltish that I had smiled.

At the end of the path I could just see the two parallel lines of the railing standing out whitely and at the end of them the white wooden gate. When I opened it I would be in the garden.

The railing and the gate were silhouetted against a soft June night that though moonless was so thickly studded with stars as to seem almost luminous.

Boughs met above my head and the path, dark and thin as a bottomless crevasse, stretched like a sword blade into the heart of the encircling night.

I glimpsed someone leaning on the railing, just a black shape like a silent motionless shadow. I can recall the sound of my own footsteps, the thorny brambles that tore at my dress as I ran. I can