

*Crookes & Cook*

SIRS,—In my recent review of Mr Hall's book *The Spiritualists* in the June number of the *Journal of Parapsychology*, I began with an account of the facts of Crookes' investigation of the alleged materialistic phenomena of Florence Cook. These facts must by now be widely known to the readers of this *Journal* and may well be omitted here, only noting that Mr Hall somewhat misleadingly refers to Crookes as having satisfied himself as to 'the actuality, paranormal nature and separate existence of the materialization "Katie King"', which attributes to Crookes a much more definite statement of belief than he himself made. Crookes's own much more hesitant statement was that to imagine 'the Katie King of the last three years to be the result of imposture does more violence to one's reason and common sense than to believe her to be what she herself affirms'. Obviously to say that *P* does more violence to one's reason and common sense than *Q* is not equivalent to an assertion of *Q*. All that Crookes said he was satisfied about with respect to Katie King was that the medium was not cheating and that the form of Katie King was separate from that of the medium. His own statement leads us to suppose that he believed that the question of the nature of such materializations would be answered by scientific men who had more time for such enquiries than he had.

Such overstatement of Crookes's position does not lead one to feel confidence in the impartiality which Mr Hall claims. His handling of the Anderson testimonies also seems unsatisfactory. He had seen all three statements by Anderson; that made to Dingwall in 1922, the statement to Mrs Goldney made in 1949, and the final statement dictated the following week in 1949 and signed by Mr Anderson. I shall refer to these statements as D, G<sub>1</sub>, and G<sub>2</sub>.

I have pointed out in the last number of this *Journal* how much inconsistency there is between these statements, and how much evidence there is of progressive elaboration of the story as the years went on, e.g. in D there is no mention of a charge that Crookes collaborated with Florence in fraud, in G<sub>1</sub> it appears as inference by Anderson 'Crookes must have been in it', and it is only in G<sub>2</sub> that it is asserted that Florence said so. In D there is nothing about Florence having told him anything of her sittings with Crookes, only a reference to spirit photographs having been taken with her daughters (who were not born at the time of the Crookes sittings). This appears to have developed into a story of the Crookes sittings during the twenty-seven years between D and G<sub>1</sub>, together with an account of how the Katie King photographs were

taken by means of ultra-violet light. This is a method of getting on to a negative something not seen by onlookers at the time of photographing which would have been appropriate to spirit photographs of her daughters but would have had no relevance to the situation when 'Katie King' was photographed since she was already visible to onlookers.

Hall, however, does not mention these discrepancies. A reader of his book might suppose that there was only one statement repeated three times with varying degrees of detail. This impression could well be reinforced by a quotation on page 99 beginning 'Florence was quite irresistible . . .'. This is stated to have been said to Dr Dingwall, but, in fact, it is not to be found in the D statement but seems to be a paraphrase of what was said much later to Mrs Goldney. On page 173, Florence is said to have 'described the details of her sister's trickery'. Readers of the *Journal* of the S.P.R. can now compare this statement with what was actually said by Anderson. The relevant passage is: 'She used to tell me of her sisters' frauds upon Blackburn.' There are no details here or in the one other reference to the matter.

When we pass from the Anderson depositions to what is claimed as supporting evidence, there seems still to be little attempt at an unbiassed presentation of the case. Some of it is irrelevant as the passage (p. 91): 'there is nothing unusual in a man of this age [42] to be attracted to a pretty, pleasant and compliant woman much younger'. There may not be anything unusual in it; it would be difficult to find statistics in support of or against this statement. But, apart from being an element in building up a prejudice against Crookes, it provides no rational ground for supposing that a particular man of 42 was attracted to a particular young woman and had a love affair with her. The ground for scepticism about Crookes's love affair with Florence Cook is not that such an affair is intrinsically improbable, but the extreme weakness of the evidence that it, in fact, took place. Against this objection, considerations of the likelihood of men of 42 falling in love with young women is plainly irrelevant.

Part of what Mr Hall brings forward as evidence seems to have no better ground than its usefulness in creating prejudice against Crookes. Thus on page 91, it is suggested that 'the scientist's family life may not have been so completely satisfactory as is generally supposed'. This is followed by a passage from his biographer Fournier d'Albe commenting on Lady Crookes as 'a wise and intelligent companion and friend in all Crookes's affairs'. It is true that it also says that she was a great talker and on some occasions out-talked her husband. This is a not uncommon

pattern of academic households, and is slender grounds for suggesting a domestic disharmony which is contradicted by all our other evidence.

There are criticisms of the character of William Crookes which do not seem to bear on the central thesis of his complicity in fraud, but which serve to build up a bias against him. They are: intolerance of criticism, love of fame, and that he claimed to have written verse really written by Byron. His responses to criticism are already known to psychical researchers who have read Crookes's *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism*. To anyone familiar with the scientific controversies of the past they do not seem very violent, particularly if one considers the very injurious charges to which they were a response. Love of fame is said to be shown by the number of societies of which he was president (including our own). Actually the number is rather small considering the distinction of Crookes, and, if it were larger, would seem to indicate an inability to decline an invitation rather than a love of fame.

The charge that he wanted to mislead people into supposing that he himself had written the passage from *Don Juan* quoted in his letter of June 5th 1874 to *The Spiritualist* seems to me the silliest one. The passage begins: 'Round her she made an atmosphere of life, . . .' Hall calls these 'the unacknowledged lines' and bases this charge of plagiarism on the fact that Crookes did not put the name of the author under it. Don't we all sometimes quote poetry without giving the name of the author? If we wanted to make it clear that we were quoting, we should enclose the passage in quotation marks. In fact, Crookes did so, but this proof that Crookes was quoting someone else's work is not mentioned by Mr Hall.

Another charge that is made by Mr Hall against Crookes is that he encouraged Florence 'to swindle an innocent and credulous old man' (p. 174). This refers to Blackburn from whom she received money during some years of her mediumship. The only evidence that Crookes was concerned with her payments from Blackburn is however an incomplete letter quoted on page 113. ' . . . or say you will agree to join . . . extent you will assist with . . . decide upon going into the . . . Believe me, very truly yours, William Crookes.' Mr Hall comments that this 'may have been his final and unsuccessful attempt to procure Blackburn's continued financial support for Florence and the Cooks'. Obviously, it might also be almost anything else.

These miscellaneous charges against Crookes do not bear directly on the main thesis of the book: the not intrinsically im-

probable but insufficiently supported charge that Crookes was having a love affair with Florence, and the highly improbable charge that he so violated his principles as a scientist that he became an accessory to her fraud. They do, however, seem to give some ground for suspicion of the 'impartiality' which, on page 178, Mr Hall claims for his inquiry.

This criticism applies also to Mr Hall's presentation of the evidence for the love affair between Crookes and Florence. It was reported by Anderson in his statement to Dingwall that Crookes was 'infatuated with her and that he took her to Paris with him for week ends'. Was this fact, or a fantasy of Florence's, or a confusion of Anderson's who was really told about Florence's actual visits to the Continent with her protector Blackburn? The nearest one gets to evidence of such a visit with Crookes is a letter from Crookes mentioned by Mr Hall in a footnote on page 101 and in the text of page 112 where it is said that on one occasion 'Crookes and Florence went abroad together', and the letter is quoted: 'we leave London on Friday evening and travel all evening via Harwich, Antwerp and Brussels'. When I wrote my review of the *Journal of Parapsychology*, I wondered whether 'we' really referred to Crookes and Florence only. Since then, by the kindness of Mrs Goldney and Mr Medhurst, I have had the opportunity of reading the letter from which this passage was extracted. The previous sentence, not quoted or referred to by Mr Hall, makes it clear that the people travelling were Crookes, Florence and her sister. The omission by Mr Hall of mention of the sister is unfortunate since a reader might suppose that the phrase 'went abroad together' meant only the two of them and was some confirmation of the statement about week-ends in Paris attributed to Florence by Anderson.

The main evidence on which Mr Hall seems to rely for the affair between Crookes and Florence is the passage of verse already mentioned which is in a passage about the difference between Florence and the materialization and is ostensibly in praise of the beauty of the materialization. Mr Hall says: 'The lines are clearly directed by the infatuated Crookes to Florence as an expression of his passionate love for her' (p. 173). Obviously the matter is not clear; the lines may have been an expression of Crookes's opinion of the beauty of Katie King. Such admiration for a materialization may be silly; some of Crookes's contemporaries thought it was. But to give such publicity to admiration for Florence's beauty, if he was having an affair with Florence, would be beyond silliness. For illicit love affairs, one seeks concealment, not publicity.

Mr Hall also notices that two lines have been omitted from the quoted passage beginning, 'And pure as Psyche. . . .' On this, Mr Hall remarks: 'The conclusion that Crookes and Florence shared the knowledge that she was not innocent seems difficult to avoid.' But if Crookes wanted to flatter Florence, why should he have insulted her by this omission? Why not suppose that he omitted the lines because they were not relevant to the purpose of his quotation, to praise the beauty of the materialization?

The charge that Crookes was an accessory in fraud by Florence is obviously much more unlikely to be true than the charge that he had an affair with her. Any of us may be guilty of sexual delinquencies; none of us is likely to carry out an activity which would make nonsense of the principles by which our lives are directed, in Crookes's case the principles of scientific investigation. It has already been pointed out that it is by no means clear that Florence ever told Anderson that Crookes was her accomplice. Evidence outside the Anderson testimonies is very tenuous. It seems to be based on surmises founded on Varley's electric circuit test and on a letter from one fraudulent medium to another found by E. W. Cox.

Electrical apparatus was devised by Mr Varley to test whether Florence remained in the cabinet during the appearance of Katie King. Crookes was naturally interested and borrowed the apparatus before the test. Mr Hall makes what he calls on page 52 the 'almost incredible' suggestion that this was in order to instruct Florence how to cheat with it. Later this suggestion is discussed as if it were a well attested fact. Since even Mr Hall finds this almost incredible and there is no scrap of supporting evidence for it, it may, I suggest, be dismissed as quite incredible.

Even more dubious is the surmise connected with a long letter from E. W. Cox to D. D. Home in which Cox tells of a letter from one medium to another describing methods of producing fraudulent phenomena and how 'an assured friend' who would not disclose the fraud might be admitted behind the curtain. Mr Hall suggests that the letter was from Florence Cook and the assured friend was Crookes. The names were not given so this is merely a surmise. Seven pages later, however, Mr Hall asks: 'If the "assured friend" was not Crookes, then who was he?' In seven pages the idea of Florence Cook having written the letter seems to have advanced from the status of an unsupported guess to that of a proved fact.

The only argument of any force for Crookes's complicity occurs at the bottom of page 170. Briefly it is that Florence's mediumship was fraudulent and that the conditions of Crookes at the seances was such that he must have known she was a fraud. This certainly

leads logically to the conclusion that Crookes was an accessory if both premisses are granted: that Crookes could not really have observed what he reported that he observed and that he could not have been deceived. Neither premiss is, however, certainly true so the conclusion is doubtful. Other arguments for his complicity drawn from the highly dubious statement of Anderson in G2, and Mr Hall's surmises about Crookes having tampered with Varley's apparatus and being the 'assured friend' of the anonymous medium's letter seem quite worthless as evidence in support of a singularly improbable accusation.

An important side of psychical research is the weeding out of spurious phenomena. It is not a denial of the value of this work to demand that those carrying it out shall conform to standards no less exacting than those we require from an experimenter. The present book does not, in my judgment, conform to reasonable standards of presenting evidence. One may admire Mr Hall's skill in working up a case from unpromising material without thinking that psychical research as a rational branch of study can be advanced by such methods.

R. H. THOULESS

2, *Leys Rd,*  
*Cambridge*

### *A 'Morass of Superstition'?*

SIR,—I sometimes refer a line of argument which puzzles me to a friend, who is an elder statesman among scientists. Such an argument occurred in a review of C. J. Jung's book, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, by Professor D. W. Harding in *The Guardian* of July 12th. The review was entirely laudatory except for one paragraph which began:

A streak of superstition runs through the whole book: precognitive dreams, apparitions of the living, hauntings, poltergeistery, premonitions, magical coincidences ('synchronicity'), the lot. Here, inescapably, one sees that he really believed it all (turning for respectable cover, to J. B. Rhine's inference from the statistics of guessing games). Some may feel compelled to believe in these things, but, if so, nothing stands between them and the morass of superstition, soothsaying, and witchcraft out of which educated people have dragged themselves in the last few centuries.

The logic of the last sentence defeats me. Whether 'these things' are to be believed or not should surely be settled by studying the available facts. And when, after studying them for many years, impartial critics of the calibre of Professor Broad