

### III

#### THE “LETTER TRAPS”

##### Richard Hodgson and the Garret at Bombay

Dr. Hodgson’s unremitting determination to suppress anything adverse to Madame Coulomb’s claims is once again demonstrated in his remarks on the charge a trap had been “fixed” by Mon. Coulomb to drop spurious Mahatma letters down from the garret of the Theosophical headquarters, “Crows Nest,” in Bombay. He relates that when he visited the place in 1885, his inspection of a room in which such letters were said to have fallen showed “interstices in the ceiling were open....A copy of our Proceedings might easily have been pushed through, and interstices were plainly visible in the ceiling from below” (Report, p. 254). This accords with the Coulomb’s assertion that the letters were delivered “between the boards” of the ceiling, through “a space sufficiently wide to permit a thick letter to slip easily” (Coulomb pamphlet, p. 33). But what is this apparent confirmation really worth?

The question to have been answered was, of course, whether such open interstices, inviting discovery (“plainly visible in the ceiling from below”), existed not in 1885 but in 1881 when, it is alleged, the “trap” operated. But here the SPR agent chose to omit certain all important facts. Colonel Olcott tells us (ODL, p. 288) that “‘The Crow’s Nest,’ on the rocky slope of the hill of Breach Candy” was had cheaply “because of its evil reputation for being haunted.” Appreciating the power of local superstition, and considering that Hodgson did not mention having seen any sign of current or recent habitation of the Crow’s Nest in 1885, one is led to suppose that since the Theosophists had moved out in 1882, the building had stood tenantless and unkept through years of

attrition by time and monsoon—little wonder that Hodgson found “the ceiling of the room abounded in interstices” (Report, p. 262)! Far more than finding spaces in the ceiling large enough to admit a “copy of our Proceedings,” his account does not exclude the probability of his finding holes there large enough to himself jump through.

That during residence these apertures were normally closed—if they existed before that—is not only the common sense view but is unwittingly disclosed by Hodgson’s allegation that when Mon. Coulomb, in fear of inspection, “endeavored to make the garret look as though it had been entirely undisturbed for a long time,” he “filled the interstices with bits of bamboo and stick and dust...”! In other words, what Hodgson purportedly saw in 1885 was, on his own showing, no duplication of what should have been seen in 1881, and is evidence of nothing but the SPR agent’s useless and solitary exploration of the dusty, dilapidated garret of an old, shunned, abandoned house.

#### Richard Hodgson vs. Emma Coulomb

Needless to say, this exploration uncovered no “trap,” nor any signs of a trap, neither screw-holes or else. But there was an instance in which, Hodgson alleged, screw-holes for a letter-trick were discovered at Theosophical headquarters. We cannot know what he found at the Crow’s Nest, but, fortunately, we can see what certain facts were in this second instance, and how the agent of the SPR treated those facts. What begins as a portentous implication against William Q. Judge ends as quite another matter: In his “Reply” of 1893, Dr. Hodgson retold that “Mr. A. D. Ezekiel, of Poona...detected in the ceiling the ‘screw-rings’ which had been used in the production of a spurious letter-phenomenon intended for his benefit (Report, p.249).” And, he adds, by footnote: “Mr.

Ezekiel informed me that he was at Adyar some time after the ‘exposure’ by the Coulobms, and Mr. Judge challenged him to point out the contrivances mentioned above. Mr. Ezekiel looked up at the ceiling and found that they had disappeared, but he pointed out to Mr. Judge the marks of the fresh paint which showed where they had been. Mr. Judge said nothing” (SPR Proceedings, Vol. ix, p. 143).

Now in his original published report, Hodgson repeated quite a different story: “Mr. Ezekiel, Theosophist of Poona, has described to me the details of a case where he received a Mahatma communication intended to be a reply to a specific question which he had asked. These details entire corroborate my conclusion concerning Madame Blavatsky, but Mr. Ezekiel is unwilling that they should be published; he has given me permission, however, to ate that the following passage which occurs I Madame Coulobm’s pamphlet (p. 73) is quite justified.

“ ‘There is another phenomenon which I must mention, because it took lace in the presence of Mr. Ezekiel, whom I shall have to mention again later. At the time of the Anniversary, among the many delegates that came on this occasion was the above gentleman. He was in company with others in Madame’s apartment when a letter fell from the ceiling Mr. Ezekiel formed the natural supposition that it must have been pulled down by some contrivance, so he went and unburdened his heart to several Fellows of the Society, giving this as a great secret. However, although a secret, it came to Madame’s ears and she immediately asked my husband to take out the screw-rings through which the string had passed, and stop the holes with a little paint to remove all traces; this done, she called some one to show how ridiculous the accusation had been.’ ” (Report, p. 249).

Now one can choose what one likes—: Hodgson’s story that Ezekiel actually detected betraying “screw-rings” in the ceiling, and that many months later, after the Coulomb ‘exposure’ (the quotation marks are Hodgson’s), when looking again for the contrivances, this gentleman saw only marks of fresh paint; or Madame Coulomb’s version that, pursuant to Madame Blavatsky’s immediate request, her husband (not Mr. Judge who “said nothing”!) had replaced the “screw-rings” with new paint in December 1883 (Convention time, or , less evidently, before February 1884 at the latest), when word came that Mr. Ezekiel only supposed that there “must have been” a use of “some contrivance.” But while there is no reason to think that the latter ever endorsed Hodgson’s final version of the circumstances—a version that had grown with time, the better to damn Madame Blavatsky (and Mr. Judge, to whom Hodgson’s “Reply of 1893 was in a principal measure directed)—, he is said to have stated the relevant passage in Madame Coulomb’s pamphlet was—in Hodgson’s own words—“quite justified.” (If we can credit Hodgson’s reporting at all, after rejecting what he finally gave as Mr. Ezekiel’s word on the matter, we still cannot suppose that Ezekiel “justified” any more of Madame Coulomb’s version than that which concerned his own role in the incident, quite apart from its alleged aftermath).

Everything tells us that Richard Hodgson was adept in literary legerdemain, that he was the SPR.’s supreme master at the art of word-juggling. If this were not so one would take his statements at implied value and assume he actually believed that Ezekiel had seen these betraying “screw-rings” in place, and that W. Q. Judge was responsible for “fresh paint” concealing the traces of these “screw-rings” and brought to his mute attention. But Hodgson does not say the witness actually saw the “contrivance” and

“detected” can have quite another meaning. And since this letter “fell in Madame Blavatsky’s sitting-room” (Ibid., p. 249), so that the “screw-rings” in the ceiling could not have been far away one is reminded that, as shown in Hodgson’s printed PLAN of the premises, curtains hung (from wires suspended through screw-rings?) in both this sitting room and in the adjacent Shrine (occult) Room; and that before W. Q. Judge left Adyar, These quarters were renovated, the shrine curtains taken down, interior painted, and, with provisions for Madame Blavatsky to sleep in the “New Room,” her bedroom curtains were also doubtless removed. Aside from the somewhat strange fact that neither Mme. Coulomb nor Hodgson undertook to define the exact location or the precise purpose of these elusive “screw-rings,” Dr. Hodgson may have laid his conscience to rest on just such facts, distorted by his reference though they might be, fortified by assurance from Madame Coulomb that Mr. Ezekiel had indeed “detected” the very same “screw-rings” employed in the alleged letter-trick when these were later used elsewhere to string up a curtain. Whatever cause might or might not have persuaded the SPR agent that his own story of 1893 was “quite justified,” one cannot conceive the Coulobms as being incapable of doing what Mr. Ezekiel’s “natural supposition” had previously suggested, viz., of boring “screw-ring” holes to be stopped with paint at the same time they fabricated other false evidence after Madame Blavatsky’s departure I 1884. But the only certain conclusion the interested reader today can make is that, in his desire to discredit William Q. Judge and his attack on the SPR Report of 1885, and in the anxiety to blackguard Madame Blavatsky, Richard Hodgson was ready in 1893 to sacrifice Madame Coulomb’s testimony along with the truth.