

II

THE “ASTRAL BELLS”

Madame Coulomb was a profoundly ignorant woman, a person of very limited imagination; and it is a testimony to the amazing power of the “will to disbelieve” that anyone has ever taken her to be the nemesis of Madame Blavatsky. So long as the skeptics and scoffers were allowed to do their own thinking, guided by private suspicions, so long as she depended upon the padres to spread her gospel, she prospered. But when she came to tell the story in her own words as she herself conceived it, all collapsed. This is no better illustrated than by the case of the “astral bells.”

“Is Your Watch a Repeater?”

In view of the fact that “raps” and “bell sounds” can be produced normally only by certain limited means and apparatus, that these physical operations can be readily prevented by an investigator, that these phenomena appear to have been among the more numerous and best-attested of Madame Blavatsky’s occult demonstrations, one can understand why Dr. Hodgson did not think it wise to give so much as a single example of first-hand testimony—apart from his own—to any experiences of this sort. It has been asserted that (illegible script) “the astral bell phenomenon has no parallel, taking all the varied circumstances, places, and conditions under which it has been produced in the entire history of spiritualism,” (Esoteric Philosophy, p. 32). (And, in his deposition before the SPR Committee of 1884, one of the principal witnesses of this phenomenon, Mr. Sinnet, gave evidence which the editors of the SPR promised in the Journal would be “printed shortly;” but when their Preliminary Report appeared, this testimony was lacking (and still remains unprinted)—suppressed.) In (illegible script) The Occult World, (p. 39), this witness (illegible script) recalls in detail how, so far back as September 1880, in his

home in Simla, he and his guests heard the “astral bells” during Madame Blavatsky’s visit. For example, these sounds were heard “one evening after dinner while we were still sitting round the table, several times in succession in the air over our heads, and in one instance instead of the single bell-sound there came one of the chimes...” (*Ibid.*, pp. 40). (Illegible script)

Dr. Hodgson in his Report conjectured at length concerning the “raps,” about which his principal informant, Mme. Coulomb, was not able to provide any enlightenment, and then he proceeds in an attempt to explain how these phenomena witnessed by so many might have occurred: “Mr. Sinnett treats with scorn the supposition that Madame Blavatsky could have produced either the ‘raps’ or the ‘astral bells’ by means of any machine concealed about her person; but I cannot help thinking that the latter sounds at least might have been produced in this way. Madame Coulomb asserts that they were actually so produced, by the use of a small musical-box constructed on the same principle as the machine employed in connection with the trick known under the name ‘Is your watch a repeater?’ and she produced garments which she asserted had belonged to Madame Blavatsky, and showed me stains resembling iron-mould on the right side, slightly above the waist, which she affirmed had been caused by contact with the metal of the machine. She declares also that the machine was sometimes carried by Babula, on the roof or in the various rooms of the house or outside, and when used by Madame Blavatsky herself was worked by a slight pressure of the arm against the side, which would have been imperceptible to the persons present. I think the ‘astral bells’ may be thus accounted for, and I must remind the reader of an important consideration which Mr. Sinnett seems to have overlooked—namely, the great uncertainty in all localization of sounds of which the cause and mode of production are unknown, especially pure tones such as he describes the ‘astral bell’ sound to be, and the great ease of inducing by trifling indications the adoption of an altogether

erroneous opinion concerning the position where the sonorous disturbance originates. Further, we may suppose, without any extravagance of hypothesis, that Madame Blavatsky may possess more than one of these machines alluded to, so that the sounds may be heard in different places at the same time. Yet the possibility that if Madame Blavatsky had one such machine she might have had two does not seem to have occurred to Mr. Sinnett..” (Report, pp. 262-63).

Before going further, it ought to be pointed out that the argument against sure localization of the origin of sound—of “especially pure tones”—is here largely invalidated for one reason and quite irrelevant for another. First, if the sounds came from Madame Blavatsky’s person, the direction might or might not be apparent to a listener at a distance, but to several witnesses, let us say to a circle of friends gathered round her, one would think the fact the sounds issued from their midst would be obvious not only by stereophonic perception, but by diminution of volume corresponding to the varying proximity of the different witnesses. On the other hand, and equally overlooked by Hodgson, is the decisive fact that if a “small musical-box” had been operating at her side and producing these sounds underneath Madame Blavatsky’s garments, no such “pure tones” would have issued forth, but instead one would only have heard a muffled ringing, the proximity and origin of which could hardly have escaped notice!

However, what of the “evidence,” apart from Madame Coulomb’s “assertions,” that such a machine did exist and was used by Madame Blavatsky? (We can ignore Hodgson’s conservative hypothesis that Madame Coulomb may have been wrong and that there may have been “more than one of these machines”—the more machines imagined, the more difficult it becomes to explain why, while purportedly saving the paper “pattern” of “Christofolo,” sniped ends of thread, and other worthless trifles, over years as “proof,” the Coulombs were not able to produce and display so much as one “musical-box!). What of the “stains resembling iron-

mould” revealed on garments which may truly have once belonged to Madame Blavatsky? One can only wonder at something so strange as the fact that, while imagining “more than one” marvelous “musical-box,” Dr. Hodgson, the adept hypothesizer, failed to question—Without extravagance of hypothesis”—whether poor Madame Coulomb provided this edifying bit of “proof” with the help of nothing more than a handful or rusted nails from her carpenter-husband’s workbox and some old rags frugally retrieved from the Adyar trash-heap? But even if he was so silly as to regard the “stains resembling iron-mould” as useful evidence, it seems odd that the SPR agent should suppose, or expect his readers to suppose, that a marvelously contrived instrument fashioned to perform the remarkable feats described, would still operate “by slight pressure of the arm,” or operate at all, when eroded by rust or iron-mould!

The Bell in the “Vacuum”

However, by now it can be agreed that, pursuant to custom, Dr. Hodgson was not only prepared to submit unfounded suppositions and worthless evidence as points against Madame Blavatsky, he was ready to overlook fact as well as theory in his attempted rescue of Madame Coulomb. One fact he was careful to overlook here is that whatever Madame Coulomb may have “asserted” and “showed” in January 1885 when Hodgson visited her, she had previously in November 1884 “asserted” and “showed” something altogether different.

In her pamphlet of that date, when describing the alleged secret entrance to the wall behind the Shrine at Theosophical headquarters, an entrance which was by necessity “left open for the servant to get inside the vacuum between the two walls,” Madame Coulomb declared knowingly: “Inside this space there hung a bell, to which was fastened a string long enough to be pulled from the room without going inside the hollow...”—lo! The “astral bell” !

Now it is certain that if, as Hodgson contended, Madame Blavatsky had one or “more” portable devices so cleverly designed as to secretly emit the “astral bell” sounds heard by Sinnett in 1880, she would have had no need years later to hang a “bell” in a “hollow” that was only constructed in December 1883! So if in January, Madame Coulomb pointed to “stains resembling “ironmould” as proof the “astral bell” was a small concealed “musical-box...sometimes carried by Babula, on the roof or in the various rooms of the house or outside” (as well as, one must imagine, “without any extravagance of hypothesis,” into the “vacuum” itself), what had she previously presented in November as proof the same sounds originated with the bell “hung” in the “hollow”? The “proof” was of the same ridiculous order: (directly continuing in quotation)...as the bell was fixed at the very top of this new frame in the inside of it, it was too high for anyone to reach it without the help of something to stand upon. To this effect, an empty box (probably the waste-paper box) which was generally kept in the occult room (where Madame Blavatsky wrote-see Early Days etc., by Sinnett, p. 39—and where she kept her “writing table”) was used for the purpose” (Coulomb pamphlet, p. 71).

All of this is highly reminiscent of the “long ladder” that, Madame Coulomb elsewhere tells us, “must be got in, and placed to the opening in the ceiling to go and put the letter in the trap” when a “precipitation” by so-called apport was in order. All betrays an abysmal lack of appreciation for the elemental rules of conjuring and real trickery. What the successful and knowing conjuror wants is not a bell that is “fixed,” nor fixed apparatus that necessitates conspicuous use of a “long ladder” or a “box.” What Madame Coulomb would have known if she had played a part in any successful sham phenomenon was that success of these performances and common precaution against discovery required that the devices for trickery be either of two types: (a) constructed so as to defy examination, or (b) fashioned as to be instantly

transportable, escaping examination when threatened. The “trap” firmly “fixed” in the attic, served by the “long ladder,” and the “bell” permanently “fixed” in the secret “hollow,” concealed only by the movable back of a sideboard, and served by the “empty box” in the next room, are things no conjuror would dream of except in nightmare.

Of course, the “box” like the “long ladder” and the “stains resembling iron-mould” was introduced as “proof” only because no other was available, these being the pegs of reality on which Madame Coulomb sought to attach her masterpieces of fancy and falsehood. And, needless to say, even Madame Coulomb refused to tell how visitors in the occult room could detect the pure tone—or even the sound—of an “astral bell” if it “hung” in the “hollow” behind a heavy-wood cupboard, muslin drapes, calico wall-cloth and a brick-and-plaster wall! Indeed, one might as well say that it sounded in a “vacuum”!

But this little mystery is not so interesting as the questions: Why did Madame Coulomb change her story between November 1884 and January 1885—and where did she get the new one? One naturally thinks that Hodgson may have prodded his witness just a bit at this juncture, for unlike the ignorant Madame Coulomb, this clever psychologist was prepared to appreciate the kind of reaction that would greet the bell-in-the-“vacuum” story in some quarters. But why did Madame Coulomb settle on “a small musical-box, constructed on the same principle as the machine known under the name “Is your watch a repeater?””??

It so happened that when the Coulomb “confessions” were loosed in the September-October issues of the Christian College Magazine, Madame Coulomb was no better able to explain the “astral bells” than she was the following November. And we cannot date her new story—if we credit Richard Hodgson—earlier than January 9th, 1885, when Hodgson tells us in a letter addressed from Madras, “This morning I called upon the Coulombs..” (Report, p. 249).

However, curiously enough, there appears in Dr. Murdoch's pamphlet (a work inscribed "Madras, January 10th, 1885") an enlightening bit of pertinent evidence. Like Richard Hodgson, LL.D., Mr. Murdoch, LL.D., in his paragraph headed "Bell Sounds" under Section titled "Occult Phenomena Unveiled," appears to have been so dissatisfied with Madame Coulomb's authoritative bell-in-the-"vacuum" explanation of November that he prudently ignored it altogether while offering an alternative theory and a suggestion of his own choosing: "A correspondent writes to the Madras Mail, that page 62 of the July number of Knowledge contains the following: "Madame Blavatsky's trick of causing a bell to sound in the air may be bought at Hamley's the Noah's Ark, Holborn; Bland's, New Oxford Street, or at any good shop where conjuring apparatus is sold, under the title, "Is your watch a Repeater?""

"A musical box can also be employed." (p. cit., p. 31).

One need hardly be disturbed by the still surviving bit of this mystery:--If, as Hodgson asserts, Madame Coulomb gave him the musical-box-and-"Is your watch a repeater?" explanation when he saw her in Madras in January 1885 did she, after November 29th, 1884, steal the idea from Knowledge, The Madras Mail, or Murdoch?