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Journal of The Society for Psychical Research,
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Dear Sir:

In his review of Obituary: The ‘Hodgson Report’ on Madame Blavatsky: 1885-1960, for The Journal (September, 1968, pp. 341-49), Dr. Robert H. Thouless expresses his belief that Richard Hodgson’s case against the Paranormality of phenomena connected with Madame Blavatsky “was, at bottom, sound.” Doubtless, few, relying upon his review, would differ with this opinion, and in fact, it would be an unavoidable conclusion if all Dr. Thouless says in his review were true.

Unfortunately, much of what is said is untrue. The errors and misconceptions in this review range from the trivial to the portentous. An example of the former is the statement and Mme Coulomb, the professed “confederate”—turned-informer, “who had acted as housekeeper at the theosophical headquarters at Adyar” was “dismissed in 1883 by the officers of the theosophical Society while Mme Blavatsky was absent in England, but her dismissal was confirmed by a letter from Mme Blavatsky” (p. 343). The year stated should be 1884 (see p. 1 of the book under review)—and when H.P. Blavatsky was in Paris. As Mme Coulomb herself disclosed in her pamphlet (pp. 104-11, Madras, 1884; London, 1885; see Waterman, pp. 1-2), she and her husband were expelled from membership in the Theosophical Society, “after a trial on uncontested charges of extortion, blackmail, slander, falsehood, and squandering household funds;” and it was only after receiving a cablegram from Mme Blavatsky, ordering them “to surrender the keys to her rooms and depart (111)” (Op.cit.), that they relinquished control of Mme Blavatsky’s quarters and left the premises.

More serious are those misstatements appearing in discussion of pivotal points upon which the whole case turns. Thus, in giving his observations on the problem of the status of the ‘Hodgson Report,’ which seem to be interjected in an attempt to dismiss any question of responsibility on the part of The Society for Psychical Research, Dr. Thouless differentiates between the former and what he describes as “a brief (6-page) report (pp. 201-207)” published by “the S.P.R. Committee” in “the same volume of the P.S.P.R.” –vol. iii (p. 342). This description is somewhat less than accurate. The Committee Report is not 6 but 200 pages in length! As the book under review first pointed out (p. 3), Hodgson’s “report appeared as Part ‘2’ (207-380) of the S.P.R.’s official Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate Phenomena Connected with the Theosophical Society (201-400), Part ‘1’ being the ‘Statement and Conclusions of the Committee’ (201-07)...” The observant reader could not have failed to detect the falsity of the reviewer’s errant ascription had the latter not seen fit to omit the relevant portion of the full title (above) which, emasculated in his initial footnote, there merely reads: “‘On Phenomena connected with Theosophy,’ Proc. S.P.R. III, pp. 201-400.”

Moreover, the question for responsibility for this Report, including, as it does, Hodgson’s personal “Account” Under Part “2,” persists unresolved, inasmuch as the document is in toto the official report of a committee duly appointed by the Council, and Rule 24 of the Constitution and Rules of The Society for Psychical Research, then (and, substantially, as Rule 35, page 7, of the later Articles of Association, now) in force, states that “The Council shall have the power to appoint for special purposes Committees composed of Members of the Society or other suitable persons. Every Committee appointed by the Council shall report its proceedings to the Council through the Chairman or Secretary of such Committee, one of whom must be a Member of Council, and no report shall be published without the sanction of the Council.” (Constitution and

Rules, 1885, Proceedings, vol. iii, p. 494, emphasis added here). Obviously, this Report ought not to have been published without the required official sanction—a circumstance not taken into account by this review. By the same token, it is equally clear that, in so far as responsibility of the Society rests with the Council, the Society is uniquely responsible for the public release and continued sale of this exceptional Report.

The reviewer expresses the opinion that the “Statement and Conclusions of the Committee”—what he calls the Committee’s “report”—had as its “basis” Hodgson’s report (p. 342). Be that as it may, the crucial question is, on what basis was the Hodgson Report founded?

It is obvious that, like Dr. Hodgson himself, his apologists are anxious to have us believe that the unsupported word of the self-convicted liars, the Coulombs, played no part in the building of this monumental edifice. Thus the reviewer tells us, “It is obvious that no reliance can be placed on the testimony of the Coulombs...Certainly no unsupported statement of the Coulombs should be regarded as evidence.” And so he declares, “Hodgson said that, in coming to his conclusions, no material allegations of theirs had been found to be false” (p. 343). This sounds like a “clean bill of health” and would be very convincing if true. But it is not true, as made very plain in the book under review.

While Dr. Thouless expresses the admirable belief, “It is well that the Hodgson report should be subjected to searching criticism...,” his representations (as here) are such as to induce the unwary reader not to consider this criticism, but to ignore it. If he had wanted his reader to gain some insight into the force of such “searching criticism,” in all fairness the reviewer ought to have added at this juncture the fact that the author reviewed not only disputes but, in his book, discredits with documented examples both the assessment and the use of Coulomb testimony by Richard Hodgson.

In connection with no more than the Shrine, and Hodgson's effort to picture this locus of phenomena as a "Conjuror's Box," the author reviewed (p. 85) provides an imposing list of contrivances necessary for its alleged fraudulent operation, observing that, "Hodgson had nothing but the Coulombs' 'unverified statements'" to show these "had existed before H.P.B. left Adyar in 1884." This accounting concludes: "Each and every one of these things was necessary to his 'case;' he built his 'conclusion' upon them; and without them the whole of that fragile edifice of charges against Mme. Blavatsky would have collapsed at first sight. And yet, to protect his 'conclusion' and 'clinch' his arguments at these and other most critical turns, Hodgson had nothing to call upon but the unsupported word of these two self-confessed liars— little wonder that at the start of his report he wished his readers to think he had not 'trusted to any unverified statements of the Coulombs..' ⁵⁸ Certainly one can find in Hodgson's report nothing more emphatic, culpable and misleading than this sanctimonious disclaimer" (pp. 85-7).

Citing examples of false pretension employed by Hodgson to conceal from his readers the existence of self-contradictions on important matters of fact published earlier by the Coulombs (and, accordingly, not to be found in the former's report), the author reviewed declares, "In view of VIII, 2 and IX, 5 and 6, if for no other reason, it is clear that no credence whatever can be put in Hodgson's fervent affirmation he was not 'able to break down any allegations' of the Coulombs 'which were in any way material.' The fact that, in these and innumerable other instances, he found it necessary to suppress the Coulombs' testimony (even so far as we know it) when it would have exposed the base falsity of his accusations if not so omitted from his report, is enough to prove he was fully aware of their abundant inconsistencies. ⁵⁷" (p. 84).

It is this kind of persistent subterfuge—not explicable as error (or a prodigious series of errors) "due to Hodgson trusting his memory for the reference instead of turning up its original

source” (Thouless, p. 346)—which inevitably leads one to conclude that Richard Hodgson, who has been called “perhaps the greatest psychical researcher of all” during “the Golden Age of Psychical Research,” was not simply imbued with too much enthusiasm and too little facility for mental recall. While telling his readers that the author of the book under review “considers that Hodgson made false accusations against Mme. Blavatsky, and that many of his statements were erroneous and were deliberately intended to create a false case against Mme. Blavatsky, and that evidence telling against this case was suppressed by Hodgson,” Dr. Thouless—in all fairness to author and readers alike—ought to have added here that in the book reviewed no such accusation in particular or in general is brought against Hodgson without specific citation of documentary evidence, book and page. And, moreover it is of some significance that the provenance of the decisive facts thus arrayed to support these accusations against the accuser of Mme. Blavatsky is not the testimony of her or her witnesses—to quote the book reviewed: “What is required in a situation such as this are facts—incontrovertible facts founded on testimony which incredulous critics cannot assail, the testimony not of H.P.B. and her witnesses but of the principal prosecutor and his chief witnesses. Nothing less than this ever satisfied the present writer, nor does he expect the reader to be content with anything else” (pp. xvi-xvii).

It is with such facts that the book reviewed marshals (in footnote 57) some 37 examples of “Hodgson’s omission and suppression of evidence which was already in print or otherwise certainly known to him (supposing he had any detective ability whatever), and which would have discredited his report at important and crucial points had it been admitted...” The review takes no notice of this. It is also with such facts that the same book (in footnote 58) adduces some 37 other instances where Hodgson’s report (falls short of giving evidence necessary to sustain its author’s claims...” This too is ignored in the review.

And it is only in the light of such facts, summarized in Chapter IX (“A Question of Integrity”), that the book, for the first time anywhere, presents an evaluation of “the relative veracity of accuser (R.H.) and accused (H.P.B.)” and finds in Hodgson’s Report “more than half an hundred clever misconstructions, all wonderfully calculated to further the destruction of Mme. Blavatsky; all skillfully executed, buttressing each other or prudently protected by the suppression of contrary testimony or evidence wherever threatened; and almost every one requiring discriminating, conscious design, cautious framing or phrasing, and careful, cunning introduction and use. What an amazing record all this is when set against Dr. Hodgson’s vain and futile attempt to demonstrate Mme. Blavatsky’s ‘deliberate falsehoods,’ to convict her of lying!” (p. 87). The readers of this review, however, are afforded no hint of this formidable, unchallenged comparison and indictment.

On the other hand, it is significant to note that nowhere in his review is Dr. Thouless able to dispute one of these facts, to prove a single accusation false, or to cite one error in reporting by the author reviewed. Neither does he advance any claim that the author, at any decisive point, rests his case on the unsupported word of Mme. Blavatsky or her witnesses. This seems somewhat strange in view of the opinion (in print) once expressed by a Member of Council and upheld by another, during discussion of this book at an Annual General Meeting of this Society, which categorized it as a collection of “smears,” of stories “beneath contempt.”

After avowing, on one page, that “no unsupported statement of the Coulombs should be regarded as evidence,” Dr. Thouless, on the next page of his review, writes: “There were also alleged appearances of Mahatmas said to be produced by M. Coulomb [1] in various disguises [2]. No more need be said about these since they were of minor [3] importance and the sole [4] evidence as to their manner of production is the unverified testimony of the Coulombs” (p. 344).

1. Misleading. Besides M. Coloumb, Mme. Coulomb Hodgson, p. 243) and the servant, Babula (Hodgson, pp. 368-69)—if not some other unknown “confederate” (Hodgson, p. 368)—2343 each said to have produced the false appearance of a Mahatma on at least one occasion.
2. False. Neither Coulombs nor Hodges depict M. Coulomb in various disguises for such a purpose. Unlike Dr. Thouless, they seem to have lacked the perspicacity to appreciate such a necessity.
3. False. They “were” not of “minor importance” either to the Theosophists, the Coulombs, or the S.P.R. investigators, though it may be true they are of minor importance in the opinion of the reviewer and uninformed persons today.

Dr. Thouless finds, “The occasion of this Report was the alleged occurrence of certain paranormal (or occult) phenomena at the Theosophical head quarters in India” (pp. 341-42), whereas the purported phenomena investigated by the Committee and studied in its Reports ranged over three continents. And it is clear from the initial notice of the Committee (Journal, S.P.R., i, p. 50) that what really prompted this official inquiry were accounts given “with the view of demonstrating that certain persons known as ‘adepts’ possess the power of producing apparitions of themselves at a distance” (in the instances related, at places some hundreds or thousands of miles apart). (Cf. Waterman, first para., Chapter IX, “The Doll, ‘Christofolo,’ and Apparitions of Mahatmas.”)

So important were these phenomena, that the first “Report of the Committee” was titled “On Contemporary Evidence as to Phantasms of the Living in India” (see Journal, S.P.R., I, pp. 72-76). This importance is also evident in the remarks of Professor Sidgwick, Chairman of the Committee and then Founder-President of the Society, as he introduced this report, noting, “the demand of critics that evidence should be got which can be repeated at will” and the profession

of Indian Theosophists to having “a large amount of contemporary evidence for the production of telepathic phenomena at will...” It is equally evident from the significant part these Mahatmic apparitions or appearances command in the Committee’s second or Preliminary (unpublished) Report of 1884, showing that they were by no means of “minor importance” to the investigators at the time. “The two main classes of phenomena described in this report are projections of the double and precipitations from the akâs” (p. 29). These are otherwise described as, “the projections of the ‘astral form’” and “the narratives of effects produced by ‘occult’ means on ponderable matter.” The former class concern, “the alleged apparitions or projections—to use the Theosophical term—of ‘astral forms’ by three persons...”, two of the named being Mahatmas Koot Hoomi and M (p. 13). The Committee had “no hesitation in affirming that, in the case of both classes of phenomena alike, the quantity and quality of the evidence is—on the general principles adopted by the Society for Psychical Research—sufficient to justify serious and systematic investigation, so far as opportunities may be offered” (p. 20). But it was the former (the testimony “which the Theosophists offer to the occurrence of telepathic phenomena”) which was considered “of special interest and importance” and “perhaps most interesting to us at the present stage of our inquiry” (pp. 9, 10, 12). So true was this that, as a matter of record (Journal, S.P.R., i, p. 75), the name originally given the investigating body was “the Committee for Inquiry into Contemporary Apparitions of the Living in India”!

4. False. If by “manner of production” is meant fraudulent production, “testimony of the Coulombs” is not the sole “evidence.” There is also the testimony of incriminating portions of the “letters from Madame Blavatsky” they provided (see Hodgson, pp. 213-14; and, Waterman, p. 65). If “evidence as to their manner of production” means all evidence as to any manner, then there is also the testimony of Mme. Blavatsky and others, as well as (occult) explanations in

“Mahatma letters” she in turn adduced. The evidence of the latter kind can be no worse than the “evidence” of the former—even by the reviewer’s reckoning (p. 343).

While thus advancing two reasons ([3] and [4]), both equally false, for declaring no more need be said about these alleged appearances of Mahatmas, Dr. Thouless gives his reader no hint that the book under review has anything at all to say about them, whereas, in fact, it demonstrates (Chapter IX) the major importance, in this controversy, of the Coulombs’ “evidence as to their manner of production.” In doing so, the book shows how this “evidence” (especially the extract Hodgson selected from a “Blavatsky-Coulomb letter,” numbered “7” on his page 213) was manipulated by the S.P.R. Committee agent in his attempt to conceal its manifest inadequacies, its irreconcilable contradiction of the Coulomb story, and its indisputable conflict with known fact. What a reader, reliant upon this review, would never suspect is that, the Coulomb-Hodgson “evidence as to their manner of production” thus having collapsed, the Mahatmic “projections” (or what Dr. Thouless chooses to call merely “alleged appearances,” with no appreciation of their ostensible psychic import) once again assume “importance” and lay claim to our “special interest” and “serious” attention.

While ignoring this and other given facts which discredit the hitherto assumed authenticity of incriminating content of the so-called Blavatsky-Coulomb correspondence, the reviewer prefers to focus attention instead upon the related question of handwriting. Referring to “letters supplied by Mme. Coulomb which she said has been written to her by Mme. Blavatsky,” Dr. Thouless asserts that the question of Mme. Blavatsky’s guilt or innocence depends “on the trustworthiness of the evidence that the incriminating portion of these letters was in the handwriting of Mme. Blavatsky”—and he puts forward these observations (pp. 345-46):

1. That “A selection of the letters with some of the admitted handwriting of Mme. Blavatsky was sent from India to London to Mr. F. G. Netherclift, expert in handwriting, and he reported that all were written by the same person (pp. 381, 382).”

2. That “This would seem to prove that Mme. Blavatsky did write the incriminating letters...”

3. That, among Waterman’s “various criticisms” of the handwriting evidence, is the charge, “That the report by Netherclift does not identify the documents examined. This is true and unfortunate since its result is that the identity of the documents examined depends wholly on the evidence of Hodgson.”

4. That, “Most serious,” Waterman charges “ ‘Hodgson misled his public by having the expert, F. G. Netherclift, certify the authenticity of certain Blavatsky-Coulomb documents which were genuine but neither disputed nor incriminating’ (pp. 6, 7). This accusation seems to assume that Hodgson was lying about what documents were sent to Netherclift. These are identified by asterisks in Hodgson’s report and no. 1 (p. 211) is so identified and is clearly incriminating...If this letter was written by Mme. Blavatsky, it is certain that she arranged the faking of phenomena. According to the handwriting expert, it was written by Mme. Blavatsky.”

5. That, “The conclusion that she arranged a faked ‘Mahatma’ telegram can only be avoided if we suppose either that the expert was mistaken in attributing the handwriting of the letter to Mme. Blavatsky, or that Hodgson was lying when he indicated that this was one of the letters sent to the expert. Either of these alternatives is possible; neither seems at all likely.”

To these criticisms, one may offer the following respective answers:

1. Netherclift’s report (p. 381) refers to “the several documents you have submitted to me for my opinion as a Professional Expert in handwriting, which are contained in Two Packets

as follows:—.” Documents listed as in “Packet 1,” if taken to be “Blavatsky-Coulomb documents,” are the only such specimens which, with certainty, are known to have been subjected to professional calligraphic examination.

Of these, all of the letters so listed are thus certified to be in the handwriting of Mme. Blavatsky. This accords with Dr. Thouless’ statement that “a selection of letters” was submitted to Netherclift who “reported all were written by the same person.” But the statement in review is less than the whole truth. Equally important, which the receiver overlooks, are the facts that: (a) of the ten documents shown to be in “Packet 1,” only five are “letters;” (b) not one of these five can be positively identified as any “Blavatsky-Coulomb letter” with known incriminating content; (c) of the other five documents, two—envelopes addressed to M and/or Mme. Coulomb—are beyond any doubt, clearly non-incriminating; and (d), one of the ten documents so submitted, “a telegram” similarly examined and compared with Mme. Blavatsky undoubted handwriting, was found not to be by the hand of Mme. Blavatsky.

2. How this “would seem to prove that Mme. Blavatsky did write the incriminating letters,” as Dr. Thouless puts it, is somewhat difficult to understand—unless we ignore the expert’s Report and prefer to fall back on that old, comfortable “will to believe,” simply taking what Hodgson gives us. But the most suitable conclusion, it would seem, is that somebody had been forging Mme. Blavatsky’s handwriting, in view of the fact at least one among :the several documents” the expert describes as having “been submitted to me for my opinion as a Professional Expert in handwriting:—with, obviously, the expectation that all would be found in the script of Mme. Blavatsky—was, in that opinion, not by her hand.

3. Waterman does not assert that :Netherclift does not identify the documents examined.” He does; but, not as Blavatsky-Coulomb documents nor as incriminating Blavatsky-

Coulomb documents. The objection made (p. 6) is that the expert's report does not identify "the contents of the 'Blavatsky-Coulomb documents; examined'"—only a portion of the contents of 4 of the 10 documents. It is, therefore, equally true to say that, "the identity of the documents examined depends wholly on the evidence of Hodgson." To the extent that such identification can be made, it depends not at all on Hodgson—which is, I think, the exact situation Hodgson desired.

4. Alluding to the "Blavatsky-Coulomb letters," Hodgson states that, "These letters, before publication in the Christian College Magazine, were, as I have said, submitted by the editor to several gentlemen with experience in handwriting..." (p. 277); and, he admits (p. 208), "One of the most important points, therefore, in the investigation was the determination of the genuineness of these disputed documents." Upon inquiry, Hodgson found that the editor of the magazine noted "was quite willing to submit the question of their genuineness to the decision of a professional expert" (Journal, S.P.R., I, p. 323). But in light of this clear-cut delineation of the need he faced, Hodgson's failure to execute the simple task required of him becomes peculiarly suspect .

While he gives extracts from a large number of these disputed documents, in pages 211-16 of his report, Hodgson places asterisks against only 9 of these as having been "among those examined by Mr. Netherclift." With the number of "Blavatsky-Coulomb letters" reduced from its total to "a selection" of unknown number sent to England, and still further reduced to these nine supplying extracts-with-asterisk, the final, diminished number almost reaches the vanishing point when we realize that, of these nine, eight cannot be identified as any of the documents denoted in this Netherclift Report as having been examined by him (though a reader might easily assume the 9 thus said by Hodgson to have been "examined by Mr. Netherclift"

naturally correspond to the 9 documents shown by the experts as having been examined and found in Mme. Blavatsky's handwriting). What is still more odd, however, is that the exception among these nine-with-asterisk ("12"), the only one which can be seen in Netherclift's inventory, instead of being clearly incriminating, is one whose content even Hodgson himself was forced to speculate upon as of dubious import (p. 215).

Dr. Hodgson's curious handling of the evidence in this instance has a close parallel, which suggests that he wanted only the handwriting of genuine, non-incriminating Blavatsky-Coulomb documents to be examined by experts or to be seen in public where experts could examine them. Thus, with more than 20 Blavatsky-Coulomb documents of incriminating content from which to choose, the only "Blavatsky-Coulomb document" Hodgson arranged to have photographed and published (see entry "B (x.)" in his Explanation of Plates, etc., following p. 380) was one which had nothing whatever to do with phenomena and was not suspected of being a forgery!

It thus remains for Hodgson's apologists to show why he did not arrange for professional examination and pronouncement upon the incriminating portions of "the Blavatsky-Coulomb correspondence" as the case demanded and as the possessor of the documents in question had tried to do and was willing that Hodgson should so do; why, instead, Hodgson submitted innocent documents in place of missing incriminating ones; why no provision was made for adequate identification of the other documents examined (unless it was to conceal that they too were not incriminating); why not all of the documents offered for examination were certified as being in Mme. Blavatsky's handwriting (one fact Hodgson and his apologists have nowhere taken into account); and why, when he had a choice of more than twenty documents with disputed handwriting and incriminating content, Hodgson arranged that only one should be kept

in England for photographic publication of its handwriting and when it was neither incriminating nor disputed.

As the book under review observes (p. 6), “What Dr. Hodgson and the Committee had to show by expert testimony was that incriminating passages of the ‘Correspondence’ were in the genuine handwriting of H.P.B., a simple task if she was guilty—but this was never done!”

Either Hodgson was incredibly obtuse and singularly incompetent—while publicly posing as an expert in the understanding and detection of subterfuge and substitution—or he was lying

Dr. Thouless, referring to the letter, with extract identified by asterisk at “1”, page 211 of Hodgson’s report states, as if it were certain knowledge, “According to the hand-writing expert, it was written by Mme. Blavatsky” (p. 346). We do not know it was ever seen by the handwriting expert—the claim it was so examined is no more than Hodgson’s claim; and, if we trust Hodgson’s honesty, we have to mistrust his memory. It may be supposed that Hodgson’s inventory of documents “examined by Mr. Netherclift”—if in error—was again simply “an error due to Hodgson’s trusting his memory for the reference instead of turning up its original source,” in this case the Netherclift Report. But, as seen, in itself this Report is not enough for proper identification. The Blavatsky-Coulomb documents submitted, segregated, numbered, inscribed and shown in paper and ink as described by Netherclift, had been returned to India before Hodgson’s reappearance in England and prior to the preparation of his Report (p. 277, footnote). What record then did he have to consult in identifying which letters had been professionally authenticated and which had not? (I prefer not to use Hodgson’s phrase, “examined by Mr. Netherclift” because if a letter was examined—or seen—by the expert at some time, in a

perfunctory manner without being pronounced upon, that fact would not certify to its authenticity.)

However, I myself do not think it likely that Hodgson was confused in this matter. It required something more than confusion to mislabel Netherclift's Report as "ON THE BLAVATSKY-COULOMB DOCUMENTS" (see p. 381) when the "original source" was in sight and as apparent as its label, requiring no exercise of "memory." It seems more likely that, in 1885, on meant to confuse his readers as to what had been pronounced genuine, just as he confused them when, in 1893, with nothing more in his pocket than this Netherclift report of indefinite value, he put forth the astonishing, all-encompassing pretension: "the fact remains that in the opinion of the best experts obtainable, the Blavatsky-Coulomb documents were undoubtedly written by Madame Blavatsky, and I know of no expert in handwriting who has examined the letters who has expressed any different opinion" (Proceedings, S.P.R., ix, p. 146).

This, of course, is what the problem had called for, and what had been demanded of him—but then, who besides Richard Hodgson could "remember" or pretend to remember that any "expert in handwriting" had ever "examined the letters" or had reached "the opinion...the Blavatsky-Coulomb documents were undoubtedly written by Madame Blavatsky..."??? Had not the S.P.R. Committee and he himself, eight years before this idiotic declaration, expressly stated that "a selection" of "the Blavatsky-Coulomb documents"—only "some of them"—had ever been sent to England for "opinion of the best experts obtainable"? Of course, if anyone chooses, they are free to see this too as simply another instance of "error due to Hodgson trusting memory," as more evidence of what Dr. Thouless calls Hodgson's "tending to over-state his case..." In short, an honest but irresponsible exaggeration. But if so, at what point did this

dangerous tendency first begin to manifest itself in Dr. Hodgson's investigation of Madame Blavatsky—and where did it stop, if at all?

5. On the other hand, our reviewer has almost as much faith in Richard Hodgson's handwriting expert as he does in Richard Hodgson. He does not take it as "at all likely" that, even if he examined an incriminating document and found it to be in Mme. Blavatsky's handwriting, "the expert was mistaken." But, before placing too much reliance upon the opinion of Netherclift and an assumption he could not have been deceived by forgery, it ought to be recalled that Hodgson himself claimed that on more than one occasion this expert had been fooled by a feigned hand. According to Hodgson, this was when, in his initial examination of specimens of Mahatmic script, Netherclift had declared they could not have been written by Mme. Blavatsky (p. 282), and—worse yet—when the expert allegedly mistook Damodar Mavalankar's handwriting for that of Mme. Blavatsky (p. 297).

This, however, is not all that casts doubt upon the reliability of Mr. Netherclift's Reports or upon the trustworthiness of Hodgson's use of those Reports.

In reference to the Mahatma letter controversy, Dr. Thouless says, "Hodgson reports (p. 282) that Mr. Netherclift first formed the opinion that the Mahatma letters were not written by Mme. Blavatsky, but that after seeing them again together with some earlier mahatma letters, he changed his mind and concluded that the whole series was written by Mme. Blavatsky (p. 283)." Passing over some minor discrepancies in this account, we note, more importantly, that our reviewer then adds the statement, "Hodgson here inserts the words 'without doubt', but since the words of the original report by Mr. Netherclift are not, in this case, given, we cannot be sure that they were Mr. Netherclift's words" (p. 348).

The reference (p. 283) mentions no document and does not use the term “report.” Hodgson merely makes the uncorroborated claim that, “The result was that Mr. Netherclift came to the conclusion that the whole of these documents were without doubt written by Madame Blavatsky.” In fact, Hodgson does not divulge even the process by which he came to understand that this was Netherclift’s “conclusion.”

But one finds it too incredible to accept that England’s “leading expert in handwriting,” Mr. F. G. Netherclift, certified as Professional Expert in the courts of England, first would have supplied Hodgson—or anyone—with a signed report denying certain specimens of handwriting were the work of Madame Blavatsky and then, later on, for any reason whatsoever, would have provided another written report declaring, to the contrary, that certain of these same specimens, among others, were by the hand of Mme. Blavatsky. Such unprofessional, unscientific conduct, such confession of bungling, would have discredited, in fact and in effect, his expertise, and would have ruined his professional reputation. The best proof against it is that Hodgson showed nothing by Netherclift to upset the latter’s original judgment on the character of Mahatma handwriting. As Professor Kirk—perhaps America’s leading professional criminologist—has observed, “In criminalistics practice, mistakes are not allowed. Testimony once given cannot be corrected by giving it a second time.”

Here, once again, in the face of all logic, and in the absence of evidence which certainly should have been supplied if Hodgson had it, critics of Mme. Blavatsky are left with but one refuge—their faith in Richard Hodgson. But this does not hinder our reviewer. Apparently with no doubt on the question, Dr. Thouless refers to—as if it were known fact—, “Mr. Netherclift’s final conclusion that the letters were written by Mme. Blavatsky...” (p. 348). One can readily imagine how Netherclift, faced with the prospect of finding himself publicly arraigned on the

side of the “occult” as “dupe of Madame Blavatsky” by reason of his testimony in her favor on the question of Mahatmic handwriting, was willing, however reluctantly, to let Hodgson’s later claims of a “change of opinion” pass uncorrected. (He certainly could not be held responsible for what Hodgson had to say on the subject; and we know of no one calling his attention to this publication.” But to believe that Netherclift would put his future career in Hodgson’s hands by signing a certificate to accommodate the latter’s claims is simply too much of a demand upon our common-sense.

This strange affair seems to have had a curious effect upon the investigating Committee itself, too. While speculating upon the content of an “original report” which probably never existed outside of his imagination, our reviewer, strangely enough, has had nothing to say of the related and very real discoveries in the book undertaken for review. While not the last word to be expected on this subject, the following findings caution us in this matter not to be less judicious than Hodgson’s compeers:

“Furthermore, it has since been noted that, contrary to general presumption, no professional handwriting expert has ever publicly proclaimed the Mahatma letters—or any specimen thereof—to be forgeries or in ‘feigned handwriting.’”

“...In fact, the only published professional reports concerned with this question show that H.P.B. could not have written the specimens of Mahatma calligraphy submitted for examination (the judgment after analysis by ‘foremost German expert in handwriting,’ Herr Ernst Schütze, Calligraphist to the Court of H. M. the Emperor of Germany).

“...But as if this were not enough, it is now for the first time in seventy-five years appropriate to point to the very strange fact—scarcely to be believed by the critics of Mme. Blavatsky—that, contrary to all previously published opinion of skeptics and believers alike,⁴¹

the S.P.R. Committee of 1884-5, in its official ‘Statement and Conclusions,’ did not adopt, did not approve, did not even deign to acknowledge Dr. Hodgson’s charge that H.P.B. wrote or instigated the writing of Mahatma letters ‘in a feigned hand.’ The prosecutor did not convince the jury on this one, prejudiced though it was at the last—it doubtless had heard more from his experts, Netherclift and Sims, than the public was ever allowed to hear!” (Obituary, etc., pp. 46-7).

To judge from Dr. Thouless’ review, the only thing worth mentioning about all of this is that the testimony of Herr Schütze “does not seem to be relevant to Hodgson’s case, since he did not suppose that Mme. Blavatsky had written all the Mahatma letters” (p. 348). This objection is itself somewhat less than relevant inasmuch as, shown in context, Schütze’s testimony—quite apart from any question of its value—was cited here mainly to reinforce the stark contrast which shows the “prosecution” empty-handed in its attempt to convict Mme. Blavatsky by expert report on Mahatma writing. Nevertheless, let us consider the objection now raised. (I am aware that Hodgson himself, in 1893, put forward a number of criticisms against the German expert’s examination; and if it were not for want of space, we could rebut these in depth—but it is, I suggest, sufficient to point out that, whatever the facts in the matter, having one professional expert report, however less than definitive it might be, is better than having no expert report at all to show, which latter was, in this instance, Richard Hodgson’s deficiency!)

Contrary to Dr. Thouless’ judgment, Herr Schütze’s testimony is relevant to Hodgson’s case—when we consider the following: (a) The principal document examined by Schütze (see Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky, by A. P. Sinnett, Appendix; 1886) was the letter of apparent supernormal delivery described in the account prepared for Hodgson (pp. 386-7). (b) It was in the apparent K. H. (Mahatma Koot Hoomi) handwriting. (c) Its content “treated of the

subject” the addressed recipient, spontaneously chosen, “had been thinking of”—concerning a letter he, in Germany, had received that day in the mail from his son in America. (d) Hodgson’s finding was that Madame Blavatsky’s handiwork was evident “throughout all the K.H. writings which I have examined, except those which there are strong positive grounds for attributing to the authorship of Mr. Damodar” (italics in original, p. 288) and, “An analysis of the circumstances of the appearance of all the Koot Hoomi writings of any importance that came before us previous to the publication of my Report, showed that so far as time, place, etc. were concerned, they might have been written either by Madame Blavatsky or Damodar” (Proc., S.P.R. ix, p. 147). (e) On the date of receipt of this examined document, Damodar was in India, while Mme. Blavatsky was present at the scene of delivery, under observation at the time. (f) Hodgson implies that the German Expert, like Netherclift, had been deceived by “Madame Blavatsky’s handiwork” in K.H. writing chiefly because this writing was done “after Madame Blavatsky had had years of practice” in that script. (g) Who then, with years of such practice—besides Madame Blavatsky herself—, could have written this K.H. letter examined by Herr Schütze?

Having found his name, in footnote 41 of the book reviewed, mentioned among those “who conceded too much” in their errant agreement that the S.P.R. Committee of 1885 had adopted Hodgson’s views on the handwriting of Mahatma letters, Mr. Victor A. Endersby, a Theosophist and American engineer of some repute, was struck with the paucity of expert opinion on this controversy, as first revealed in the passages quoted above, and undertook to remedy the situation. Upon submission of the requisite evidence (Plates I and II, following p. 380 of the Committee Report), Endersby obtained (and in 1964 published) the written report of Dr. Paul L. Kirk, Professor of Criminology at the University of California at Berkeley. In effect,

Professor Kirk's judgment shows, among other things, that, after ample professional comparison of photographic specimens of handwriting submitted (and said by Hodgson to be by Mme. Blavatsky and Damodar Mavalankar in both their undoubted scripts and in "feigned" hands meant to be taken for Mahatma writing), this contemporary expert has reached an opinion which contradicts and overturns Hodgson's amateur theory that these specimens of mahatma writing were by Mme. Blavatsky and Mr. Mavalankar. Unlike Hodgson, Dr. Kirk examined the specimens with no knowledge of their significance or purported origin—thus eliminating the possibility of predilection or bias, conscious or unconscious.

The predominate portion of the book reviewed (and a subordinate part of the review itself) is devoted to discussion of the controversy surrounding the Shrine in which materialization (apport and "precipitation") phenomena were said to have occurred at the headquarters of the Theosophical Society, Adyar, India. After observing the "obvious common-sense explanation of the appearance in the shrine of letters and saucer is that they were inserted into the shrine through a hole in the wall behind it and a trap door at the back of the shrine," Dr. Thouless, in his review, draws a conclusion that, "there seems no good reason for supposing that any other explanation of the shrine phenomena is necessary." Perhaps this would be so if what he says about the "shrine" and the "hole in the wall" and "a trap-door at the back of the shrine" were true. But the reviewer's treatment of these points is so widely at variance with the uncontested, documented findings in the book under review, that it makes one wonder if the reviewer was doing anything more than simply "trusting his memory for the reference instead of turning up its original source" when making the following statements (p. 347):

1. "It is not in dispute that the hole and the trap-door were both in existence at some time."

2. “By the time Hodgson reached Adyar, the shrine had been destroyed and the recess in the wall behind had been filled in.”
3. “He could not, therefore have any first-hand knowledge of either.”
4. “This fact did not prevent him from devoting many pages of his report to speculations about the method of introducing objects into the shrine....The speculations as to how it happened are not an essential part of his case.”

Statement (1) is false on two counts: (a) it ignores the fact that, buttressed by several pages of evidence (III-J, etc.), the book under review presents what it describes (p. 45) as “sufficient proof that the Coulobms’ secret passageway at the back of the Shrine had never existed” and (b) the book (pp. 11-12) shows “Hodgson gave nothing but the Coulobms’ word for any divided panel, or handle; nor, any explanation for not having these”—“Hodgson had nothing but the Coulobms’ ‘unverified statements’ to show that the alleged leather handle and divided panel (III, A-3, 4) ever had existed” (p. 85)—and in Section III, A-3, -4, -6, -7, -8, -9, -10, -11 and -12 (pp. 11-14), gives abundant evidence which indicates it (“trap-door”) never existed.

Regarding statement (2), it is quite false to say that “the recess in the wall behind had been filled in” –whether or not by the time “Hodgson reached Adyar.” For one thing, Hodgson himself asserts (p. 228), as if it were true, that, “with respect to the sideboard aperture and the recess, these were, as I afterwards found, still in existence when I arrived at Adyar, though Mr. Damodar stated to me that the recess had been blocked up. This last statement of Mr. Damodar’s I can only regard as a deliberate misrepresentation” (cf. Waterman, pp. 42-43). The claim that the recess had been “filled in” before Hodgson’s arrival at Adyar is both unique and untrue. The term originally used—and properly so—is “blocked up” and refers to the bricking-up (and re-plastering and re-papering) of the entrance-way to the recess (Op. cit.).

Statement (3) is false on two counts also: (a) Hodgson obtained first-hand knowledge of the recess (as explicitly shown in the book reviewed, p. 44) when, as he explained in 1893, “the bricked frame was removed during my stay at Madras,” giving him access to the recess—though he suppressed this all-important fact in his 1885 report and in no case acknowledged the opportunity it gave him to inspect the east face “the wall immediately behind the shrine” where he, if anyone, would have found traces of “the hole in the wall” had the alleged passageway to the Shrine ever existed. (b) Hodgson could have given his readers first-hand knowledge of the Shrine and its construction—perhaps even the original drawing prepared for its construction by Deschamps, the commercial cabinet-makers in Madras who built it (Ibid., p. 10) and whom Richard Hodgson may or may not have interviewed—had he not preferred to let his readers assume it had been made in secret by Mon Coulomb as a “conjurer’s box” complete with trap-door.

Speculation such as referred to in statement (4) was recognized as accepted fact by the S.P.R. Committee itself when, as number “(2)” of its positive “conclusions,” it declared: “That, in particular, the Shrine at Adyar, through which letters purporting to come from Mahatmas were received, were elaborately arranged with a view to the secret insertion of letters and other objects through a sliding panel at the back, and regularly used for this purpose by Madame Blavatsky or her agents” (p. 204). Moreover, what Dr. Thouless here chooses to gratuitously describe as “speculations...not an essential part of his case,” were put forward by Dr. Hodgson himself as bedrock on which to build the pillory of Mme. Blavatsky—: “It seems clear from all I have said...that there undoubtedly were all the necessary apertures for access to the shrine from the back, at some period before the Coulombs left” etc. (p. 2267) and “it appears from my own inquiries....that evidence furnished partly by my own inspection, and partly by a large number of

witnesses, most of them Theosophists, concerning the structure, position and environment of the shrine...renders the conclusion unavoidable that the phenomena in question were actually due to fraudulent arrangement” (pp. 312-3).

It has remained for Dr. Thouless at this late date to brush aside these thunderbolts of pretension, cherished by generations of anti-Blavatsky critics as proof of her “guilt,” as mere non-essential “speculations” –but significantly enough, only after the book reviewed had first exposed the untruth and worthlessness of these claims and had proved them to be liabilities for anyone attempting to defend the S.P.R. Committee of 1885 of which Richard Hodgson was the chief agent. At which point, his devaluation paves the way for Dr. Thouless to add, “One can properly conclude that a conjuring trick has been performed without knowing exactly how the trick was done.” This may be true—but is it so when there is a question as to who the conjuror was (Blavatsky or Hodgson) and what the trick was (Theosophical “phenomena” or the “exposure” of Theosophical phenomena)? More importantly, though one may “conclude that a conjuring trick has been performed” in a case like this, without “knowing” –or in absence of reasonable certainty as to—“how the trick was done,” such a judgment is no better than commonplace guessing, and bad guessing at that if, as in this review, decisive facts, known and published, have to be consistently and flagrantly ignored to keep the guessing-game alive. And is it not true that, 88 years ago, founders of our Society expressed hope that, in these matters, guessing soon would give way to Psychical—Research?

While demonstrably failing to provide fair representation of the gamut of new, documented findings brought to bear upon this case by the book undertaken for review, the review in question thus conveys an extraordinary amount of error and gross misstatement, some of which is so flagrant as to make one wonder whether the whole of the book had been read—or

read with any care. Any such lackadaisical treatment would have to be excused on grounds that the reviewer—not unlike a good many of his readers—does not think the subject of much importance: “It was all a long time ago and, even if Hodgson was wrong, this may not be considered to have any present-day importance” (p. 343). Not to dwell upon any question so insignificant as the possibility of a great wrong, or of injustice and its enduring harvest of poison in human affairs, this overlooks at least two vital implications of the present case:

1. It was the first authoritative “exposure” by an official committee of our Society, and, by reason of that fact and because of the distinguished character and unique position and influence of the members of the committee (Hodgson, Podmore, Myers, Gurney, the Sidgwicks, and Stack), it laid the groundwork for the methodology which clearly can be traced down through time to where today it still dominates the investigation of the fraud problem in Parapsychology—at least in those inquiries extending beyond the walls of the Psychical research laboratory. Thus, in her Presidential Address on the society’s Golden Jubilee, Mrs. Sidgwick singled out this case as one which had had “a great effect on our understanding...” (Proc., S.P.R. xli, p. 9). What then must have been the effect and its ramifications if, unbeknownst to those dominant leaders of the S.P.R. who comprised his fellow Committee-members, “Hodgson was wrong” –willfully or otherwise? Could the consequences have been anything less than disastrous? (For example, what would be the significance of all this in relation to an over-all re-evaluation of the famous Piper case which Dr. Hodgson stage-managed at Boston during most of his remaining years?)

One known result has been that the subject of Madame Blavatsky, without doubt, has constituted the most widely-known controversy with which our Society’s name has been linked; and a check of encyclopaedias, for example, will show that over the years it has brought greater

publicity to the Society than any other single case encountered. That the publicity generally has been favorable in the past is, of course, no guarantee it will be so in the future if those prevail who want to see “the exposure” of Madame Blavatsky credited to The Society for Psychical Research.

2. It was the only instance in which a committee of psychical researchers of standing undertook to investigate¹ the alleged powers of a self-professed occultist said to be proficient in the practices of—and allied with—Asiatic theurgists (Mahatmas, Rāja-Yogis) who, unlike spiritualist mediums (who have provided the chief reservoir for Western experimental subjects in Para-psychology, outside of card-calling projects and the like), credit their wonder-working to the spirits of the living not to the spirits of the dead. And, “if Hodgson was wrong,” does it not thus re-open a door to speculation and possible experiment of a kind and in an area passed by, disdained for 83 years, ever since this Committee of 1884-5 sealed it shut to Western parapsychology?

¹ After 75 years of general, contrary presumption, it has been discovered that Madame Blavatsky did perform phenomena for members of this investigating Committee.

In 1960, in consequence of a prior petition addressed to the Council of the S.P.R., the records or extant data remaining on this case in the closed files of the archives of the Society, for the first time were microfilmed and made available for study—an historic landmark not heretofore disclosed to the membership in general. A number of unpublished documents of unique importance were thus brought to light, some of which until then were unknown to historians. One of these is a rejected draft (in printer’s proof) of the Committee’s preliminary and provisional report of 1884, a portion of which is quoted in a paper on Madame Blavatsky printed in the July, 1962 number of The Journal of The American Society for Psychical Research (pp. 131-139). (This article, since 1893 the longest notice—and the first non-committal study—of Madame Blavatsky published in an official organ of a recognized society for Psychical Research, is unknown to the members of the S.P.R. by reason of the curious fact that, for some cause, it, and only it, was omitted from mention among the contents when this number of the A.S.P.R. Journal was otherwise accurately reviewed in the S.P.R. Journal for December, 1962, (pp. 424-25)).

The passages quoted (pp. 134) from the newly-discovered draft reveal that two members (F. W. H. Myers and Edmund Gurney) of the investigating Committee were originally listed as among the witnesses to Theosophical phenomena, since on two occasions following the inauguration of the official inquiry, once in company with Sir William F. Barrett, they themselves had heard the 'astral bell' in Madame Blavatsky's presence and were unable to explain it in normal terms to their own satisfaction.