

NOTES ON HENRY SLADE, Medium

By Walter A. Carrithers, Jr.

Slade was known in mediumistic circles in Michigan as far back as 1860; but it was not until his selection by the Blavatsky-Olcott committee that he first came to prominent notice. Information is lacking as to his birth and early life. Doubts have been cast on the title "Dr." though without specific objection.

"Of all the physical phenomena of mediumship, the slate-writing performances of such men as Slade and Eglinton appear to have proved most baffling to the expert," according to Frank Podmore, chief historian of the arch-skeptics (*MODERN SPIRITUALISM*, vol. ii, pp. 204-5; Methuen and Co., London, 1902).

It is generally agreed that Slade was the first medium to introduce and popularize "'slate-writing". Having witnessed one of Slade's séances, Podmore, in an address to the British National Association of Spiritualists in 18880, "says of this séance that he remembers writing on the day following that it had finally solved his doubts as to the truth of spiritualism." (*PROCEEDINGS, S.P.R.*, vol. xxv, p. 6). Later, of course, he found his doubts still alive and returning with increased vigour.

In his paper, "The Possibilities of Mal-Observation in Relation to Evidence for the Phenomena of Spiritualism," read at a General Meeting of the S.P.R., July 5th, 1886, Mr. C.C. Massey recounts a phenomenon witnessed in company with Col. Olcott on 14th of October, 1875, with Henry Slade, at New York: "No mediumistic phenomenon that I have witnessed has made stronger or more lasting impression upon me than this one." (*PROC. SPR*, vol. iv, p. 81). If you want his description of this phenomenon, in which a chair, found to be free of all attachments, at

Massey's request, got up and moved about while the medium at a distance remained immobile and simultaneously observed, ask for it—a couple of paragraphs or less.

Sir William F. Barrett, who convened the meeting for founding of the SPR: “I was very much impressed with the successful results that I had with Slade in broad daylight and under conditions that seemed to render fraud impossible (and until I am shown how the writing could be accomplished by legerdemain I find it stupendously difficult to accept that hypothesis)...” (PROC., SPR, iv, p. 38). Among others who came to acknowledge the reality of phenomena exhibited in Slade's presence were: Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, Sergeant Edward Cox, Dr. Carter Blake, Dr. George Wyld, Miss. Kislingbury (in 1876, Secretary to the British National Association of Spiritualists), Professor Johann C.F. Zollner and his colleagues Fechner, Weber, and Scheibner.

Zollner mentions Slades' as traveling with “his niece (the daughter of his deceased wife's sister) as well as his secretary, Mr. Simmons, and his daughter...”

Samuel Bellachini, Court Conjuror to the Emperor of Germany signed a notarized affidavit declaring that after a week's experience he found the phenomena in Slade's presence to be “absolutely impossible” by conjuring.

In Russia, Grand Duke Constantine, Prof. Bouterlof and Alexander N. Aksakoff, Imperial Councillor to the Czar, were among those converted to belief by experiments with Slade. Nevertheless, in the latter privately communicated his disappointment with the St. Petersburg seances as a whole, and told the astronomer M. Schiaparelli, as the latter testifies in a letter published by Camille Flammarion (MYSTERIOUS PSYCHIC FORCES, p. 66, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1907), that he had “detected” Slade “in trickery.”

Claims were made that Slade was detected in trickery by Lankester and Donkin (in London, 1876), by Members of the Seybert Commission (at Philadelphia, 1885), at a private seance in New York (again the same year), at Weston, West Virginia in 1886, at Newcastle-on-Tyne when he entered England under the pseudonym “Mr. Wilson” in 1887.

In his book, The Bottom Facts Concerning the Science of Spiritualism (G.W. Carleton and Co., New York, 1884) John W. Truesdell, a self-confessed pick-pocket and fraudulent medium alleges that in New York City in 1872 or 3, Dr. Slade confessed to him; but the words Truesdell puts into Slade’s mouth are so much in the Author’s own style and so ambiguous as to suggest that they were chosen to avoid the possibility of a courtroom confrontation for libel. Mr. Truesdell also quotes an undated and anonymous extract from the “Daily Intelligencer” which goes to show that about 1882 when “exposed” at a séance in much the same manner as by Lankester and Donkin, and when threatened with arrest by the Police Chief of Bellville, Ontario, Slade “wilted at once, and appeared for a time quite dazed and stupid... begged with tears and sobs to be allowed to leave town” and “acknowledged that all the phenomena which had taken place were fraudulent...” (Op. cit., p. 294). Among the Bellville witnesses, there were “several” who were “not satisfied with the explanation he gave of the production of writing...”, and, before leaving town, Slade himself “said that when he admitted that his manifestations were the results of trickery he told a lie in order to avoid arrest, and was ready, on account of fear, to admit or deny anything.” (Op. cit., pp. 295-6).

Finally, some years after Slade’s death, Remigius Weiss, a professional conjuror known as “Albus”, who had, he said, been called as an expert by the Seybert Commission, produced a signed, “H. Slade.” (John Mulholland, Beware Familiar Spirits, Charles Scribner’s Sons, N.Y., 1938, pp. 117-8). “There is no question of its authenticity, and it makes the evidence quite

complete,” observes Mulholland, but the document is undated, and like the “confession” to Truesdell, it was unwitnessed, and, lacking “expertization,” by its content conveys nothing convincing.

With respect to the “exposures” of Slade, as Podmore remarks, “The presumption in favour of fraud as the explanation of the physical phenomena is so overwhelming that it is not appreciably increased by a demonstration of fraud in any particular case.” (MODERN SPIRITUALISM, ii, p. 191). Moreover, there is reason to believe that what were taken as instances of Slade’s surreptitious use of hand or foot were in reality nothing more than sightings of the operation of “astral limbs”, thus, at Weston, his business manager, J. Simmons, testified, “I do not doubt that these gentlemen saw what they assert they did... I myself saw a hand, which I could have sworn to be that of Slade, if it had been possible for his hand to be in that position, while one of his hands lay upon the table and the other held the slate under the corner of the table, a third hand appeared with a clothes-brush (which a moment previously had brushed against me from the knee upwards) in the middle of the opposite edge of the table, which was forty-two inches long.” (THE HISTORY OF SPIRITUALISM, vol. i, pp. 296-7, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Geo. H. Doran Company, 1926).

Dr. Slade, after 1876, exhibited his mediumistic talents on the Continent, in Denmark, Germany, Russia, and at Prague and the Hague; and afterwards, journeyed to Australia, returning later to America. Perhaps his last recorded séance was that noticed in a report of February 10, 1891, when at New York City he was said to have been detected in fraud by Richard Hodgson (see the latter’s report, PROCEEDINGS, SPR, vol. viii, pp. 293-5).

It is reported that Slade became addicted to alcohol; and the newspaper reports show he died in a private hospital in Michigan, September 1905.

For the Report of the Seybert Commission, see PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE COMMISSION APPOINTED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA TO INVESTIGATE SYBERT (reprint), J.B. Lippincott Co., 1920; and for replies to the Report, see: What I Saw at Cassadaga Lake: A REVIEW OF THE SYBERT COMMISSIONERS' REPORT, by A.B. Richmond; Colby and Rich, Boston, 1888, with "An Open Letter to Professor George S. Fullerton, of the University of Pennsylvania, Member and Secretary of the Seybert Commission for Investigating Modern Spiritualism," by C.C. Massey, pp. 100-33.

For reviews of the evidence favoring the Slade phenomena, see Chapter xiii of Doyle's HISTORY OF SPIRITUALISM, vol. I; and PSYCHOGRAPHY: A Treatise on One of the Objective Forms of Psychic or Spiritual Phenomena, by M.A. Oxon (W. Stainton Moses) 2nd ed., London, The Psychological Press Association, 1882; also, THE SLADE CASE (a pamphlet) by the same author.

EXTRACTS:

From: TRANSCEDENTAL PHYSICS: An Account of Experimental Investigations from the Scientific Treatises of Johann Carl Fredrick Zollner, Professor of Physical Astronomy at the University of Leipsic, etc., etc.

Pp. 39-40: "In order to repeat some observations with an accordeon, in the presence of Home (which were made and published by Crookes and Huggins) besides the above-mentioned large hand-bell, an accordeon had been brought by one of my friends. The bell was placed under the table, as in the morning, the Slade grasped the keyless end of the accordeon (which he had never had in his hands before, but saw now for the first time) above, so that the side with keys hung down free. While Slade's left hand lay on the table, and his right, holding the upper part of the accordeon above the table, was visible to us all, the accordeon began suddenly to play, and at

the same time the bell on the floor to ring violently. The latter could thus not be touching the floor with its edges during the ringing. Here upon Slade gave the accordion to Professor Scheibner, and requested him to hold it in the manner above described, as it might possibly happen that the accordion would play in his hand also, without Slade touching it at all. Scarcely had Scheibner the accordion in his hand, than it began to play a tune exactly in the same way, while the bell under the table again rang violently. Slade's hands meanwhile rested quietly on the table, and his feet, turned sideways, could be continually observed during this proceeding."

p. 46: "Friday, 14th December 1877 (11.0 to 11.40 A.M.). Today, first one of the slates kept always in readiness, which I myself selected and cleaned, was laid open with a bit of slate-pencil upon the floor under the table. Now, while Slade had both his hands linked with ours upon the table, and his legs, turned sideways, were continually visible, writing, loudly perceptible by us all, began on the slates lying below. When we raised it, there were on it the words—'Truth will overcome all error!'"