

THE MYSTERIOUS MR. HOME

Strange Career of a Queer Young Man of Connecticut Who Puzzled Scientists and Amazed the People of Two Continents

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Drawing by Joseph Clement Coll

So you've brought the devil to my house, have you?"

"No, no, aunty, no! It's not my fault." With an angry gesture, the woman, tall, large boned, harsh visaged, pushed back her chair and advanced threateningly toward the pale, anemic looking youth of seventeen, who sat cowering at the far end of the breakfast table.

"You know this is your doing. Stop it at once!" The other gazed helplessly about him, while from every side of the room came a volley of raps and knocks. "It is not my doing," he muttered. "I can't help it."

"Begone then! Out of my sight!" Left to herself and to silence,—for with her nephew's departure the noise instantly ceased,—she fell into gloomy meditation. She was an exceedingly ignorant, but a profoundly religious, woman. She had heard much of the celebrated Fox sisters, with tales of whose strange actions in the neighboring State of New York the countryside was then ringing, and recognized, or imagined she recognized, a striking similarity between their performances and the tumult of the last few minutes. It was her firm belief that the Fox girls were victims of demonic influence, and no less surely did she deem it impossible to attribute the recent disturbance to human agency. Her nephew was not given to practical jokes; there had been nothing unusual in his manner; he had greeted her cheerily as usual, and quietly taken his seat. But with his advent, and she shuddered at the remembrance, the knockings had begun, penetrating, frightful. There could be only one explanation: the boy, however unwittingly, had placed himself in the power of the devil. What to do, however, she knew not, and fumed and fretted the entire morning, until on his reappearance at noon the knockings broke out again. Then her mind was quickly made up.

Called on the Ministers

LOOK you!" said she to him. "We must rid you of the evil that is in you. I shall have the ministers reason with you and pray for you, and that at once."

True to her word, she despatched a messenger to the three clergymen of the little Connecticut village in which she made her home, and all three promptly responded to her request. But their visits and their prayers proved fruitless. Indeed, the more they prayed the louder the knockings became; and presently, to their astonishment and dismay, the very furniture appeared bewitched, dancing and leaping as though alive. "Verily," said one to the irate aunt, "the boy is possessed of the devil." To make matters worse, the neighbors, hearing of the weird occurrences, besieged the house day and night, their curiosity whetted by a report that, exactly as in the case of the Fox sisters, communications from the dead were being received through the knockings. Incredible as it seemed, this report found speedy confirmation. Before the week was out the lad told his aunt:

"Last night there came raps to me spelling words, and they brought me a message from the spirit of my mother."

"And what was the message?" "My mother's spirit said to me, 'Daniel, fear not, my child. God is with you, and who shall be against you? Seek to do good. Be truthful and truth loving, and you will prosper, my child. Yours is a glorious mission,—you will convince the infidel, cure the sick, and console the weeping.'"

"A glorious mission!" mocked the aunt, her patience utterly exhausted. "A glorious mission, to bedevil and deceive, to plague and torment! Away, away, and darken my doors no more!"

"Do you mean this, aunty?" "Mean it, Daniel? Never shall it be said of me that I gave aid and comfort to Satan or child of Satan's. Pack, and be off!"

Home's Involuntary Start

In this way was Daniel Dunglas Home launched on a career that was to prove one of the most marvelous, if not the most marvelous, in the annals of mystification. But at the time there was no reason to anticipate the remarkable achievements that the future held in store for him. He was fitted for no calling. Ever since his aunt had adopted him in faraway Scotland, where he was born of obscure parentage in 1833, he had led a life of complete dependence, not altogether cheerless, but deadening to initiative, and handicapping him terribly for the task of making his way in the world. His health was broken; his pockets were empty; he was without friends. Cast upon his own resources under such conditions, it seemed only too probable that failure and an early death would be his portion.

Two things only were in his favor. The first was his native determination and optimism; the second, the interest aroused by published reports of the phenomena which had led to his expulsion from his



"Again and Again He Was Lifted from the Floor."

aunt's house. Already, though only a few days had elapsed since the knockings were first heard, the newspapers had given the story great publicity, and their accounts were greedily devoured by an everwidening circle of readers quite willing to regard such happenings as evidence of the intervention of the dead in the affairs of the living. It was, it must be remembered, an era of widespread enthusiasm and credulity, the heyday period of spiritualism. As soon, therefore, as it became known that young Home was at liberty to go where he would, invitations were showered on him.

Among these was one from the nearby town of Willimantic, and thither Home journeyed in the early spring of 1851. It was determined that an attempt should be made to demonstrate his mediumship by the table tilting process then coming into vogue among spiritualists, and the result exceeded all expectations. The table, according to an eye witness of the first séance, not only moved without physical contact, but on request turned itself upside down, and overcame a spectator's efforts to prevent its motion. True, when this spectator "grasped its leg and held it with all his strength"; the table "did not move so freely as before"; still it moved, and Home's fame mounted apace.

From town to town he traveled, holding séances, at which, if contemporary accounts are to be believed, he gave exhibitions of supernatural power far and away ahead of all other of the numerous mediums that were by this time springing up throughout the Eastern States. On one occasion, we are told, the "spirits" communicated through him the whereabouts of missing title deeds to a tract of land then in litigation; on another, they enabled him to prescribe successfully for an invalid for whom no hope was entertained; and time after time they conveyed to those in his séance room messages of more or less vital import, besides vouchsafing to them "physical" phenomena of the greatest variety.

What was most remarkable was the fact that the

young medium steadfastly refused to accept payment for his services. "My gift," he would solemnly say, "is free to all, without money and without price. I have a mission to fulfil, and to its fulfilment I will cheerfully give my life." Naturally this attitude of itself made for converts to the spiritualistic beliefs of which he was such an apt exponent, and its influence was powerfully reinforced by the result of an investigation conducted in the spring of 1852 by a committee headed by the poet William Cullen Bryant and the Harvard professor David G. Wells. Briefly, these men declared in their report that they had attended a séance with Home in a well lighted room; had seen a table move in every direction and with great force, "when we could not perceive any cause of motion," and even "rise clear of the floor and float in the atmosphere for several seconds"; had in vain tried to inhibit its action by sitting on it; had occasionally been made "conscious of the occurrence of a powerful shock, which produced a vibratory motion of the floor of the apartment in which we were seated"; and finally were absolutely certain that they had not been "imposed upon or deceived."

A Tremendous Sensation

THE report, to be sure, did not specify what, if any, means had been taken to guard against fraud, its only reference in this connection being a statement that "Mr. D. D. Home frequently urged us to hold his hands and feet." But it none the less created a tremendous sensation, public attention being focused on the fact that an awkward, callow, country lad had successfully sustained the scrutiny of men of learning, intelligence, and high repute. No longer, it would seem, could there be doubt of the validity of his claims, and greater demands than ever were made on him. As before, he willingly responded, adding to his repertoire, if the term is permissible, new feats of the most startling character. Thus, at a séance in New York a table on which a pencil, two candles, and some papers had been placed, tipped over at an angle of thirty degrees without disturbing in the slightest the position of the movable objects on its surface. Then at the medium's bidding the pencil was dislodged, rolling to the floor while the rest remained motionless; and afterward the tumbler.

A little later occurred the first of Home's levitations, when, at the house of a Mr. Cheney in South Manchester, Connecticut, he is said to have been lifted without visible means of support to the ceiling of the séance room. To quote from an eye witness' narrative: "Suddenly, and without any expectation on the part of the company, Mr. Home was taken up in the air. I had hold of his feet at the time, and I and others felt his feet—they were lifted a foot from the floor. . . . Again and again he was taken from the floor, and the third time he was carried to the lofty ceiling of the apartment, with which his hand and head came in gentle contact." A far cry, this, from the simple raps and knocks that had ushered in his mediumship.

Now, however, an event occurred which threatened to cut short alike his "mission" and his life. Never of robust health, he fell seriously ill of an affection that developed into tuberculosis. The medical men whom he consulted unanimously declared that his only hope lay in a change of climate, and, taking alarm, his spiritualistic friends generously subscribed a large sum to enable him to visit Europe. Incidentally, no doubt, they expected him to serve as a missionary of the new faith. And it may be said at once that in this expectation they were not deceived. No one ever labored more earnestly and successfully in behalf of spiritualism than did Daniel Dunglas Home from the moment he set foot on the shores of England in April, 1855; and no one in all the history of spiritualism achieved such individual renown, not in England alone but in almost every country of the Continent.

It is from this point that the mystery of his career