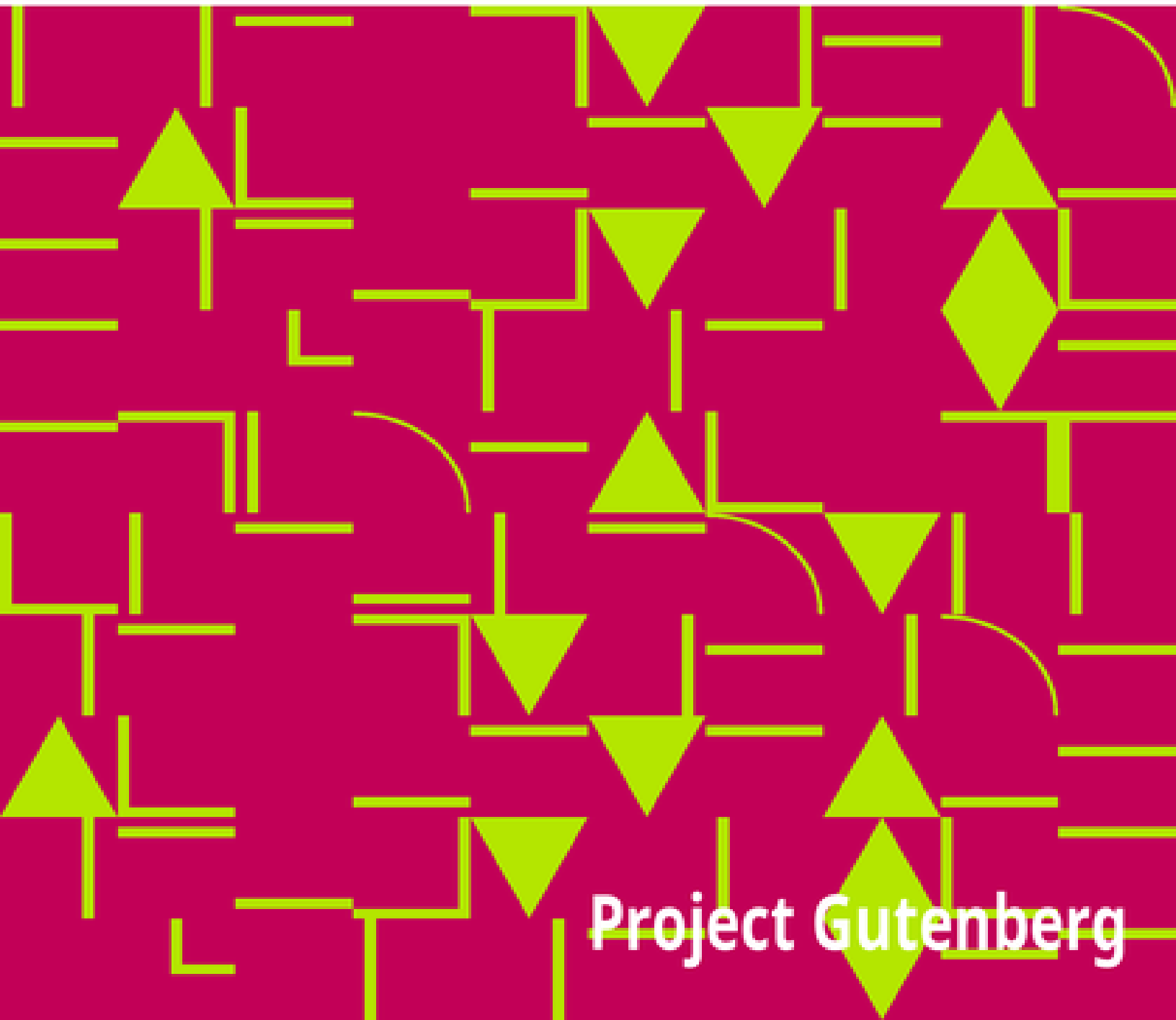


The Psychical Researcher's Tale - The Sceptical Poltergeist

J. D. Beresford



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Title: The Psychical Researcher's Tale - The Sceptical Poltergeist

Author: J. D. Beresford

Release date: August 31, 2007 [eBook #22479]

Most recently updated: February 4, 2013

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/22479

Credits: Produced by David Widger

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POLTERGEIST ***

**THE PSYCHICAL
RESEARCHER'S TALE
THE SCEPTICAL
POLTERGEIST**

From "The New Decameron"—Volume III.

By J. D. Beresford

There was once a time (he began) when I decided that I was a fraud; that I could not be a psychical researcher any longer. I determined to give it all up, to investigate no more phenomena nor attend another séance, nor read a word about psychical research for the remainder of my life. On the contrary, I planned an intensive study of the works of the later Victorians, of that blissful period in the history of Europe when we could believe in the comforting doctrine of materialism. "Oh!" I thought, "that one had a Haeckel or a Huxley living now to console us with their beautiful faith in the mortality of the soul!" The Neo-Darwinians failed to convince me; the works of H. G. Wells left me cold.

I will tell you the events that brought me to this evil pass.

It is not likely that anyone here will remember the Slipperton case. It attracted little attention at the time. In 1905 there was still a little sanity left in the world. A few even of the London dailies were nearly sane then, and refused to report ghost stories unless they were known to be untrue. And the Slipperton case had hardly any publicity—an inch in the *Daily Mail*, headed "Family Evicted by Ghosts," was the only newspaper report that I saw; though there may have been others. In these days the story would be given a couple of columns opposite the leader page; and the Sunday papers...

I was connected with the thing because Edgar Slipperton and his wife were friends of mine; quiet, old-fashioned people who believed that when you were dead you *were* dead, and that that was the end of it.

The phenomena that drove them out of their house at last were of the ordinary poltergeist type that date back to the days of John Wesley. The Slippertons had a fat and very stupid cook, whom I suspected of being an unconscious medium; but they were so attached to her that they refused to give her notice, as I strongly advised them to do. They told me that although she was constitutionally unable to grasp a new idea, such as the idea of a different pudding, she was entirely dependable, always doing the same things in the same way and with the same results. And while this confirmed

my suspicions that she was a spiritualistic medium, I recognised that she might have useful qualities as a cook.

The Slippertons stood it pretty well for a time. At first they were only mildly inconvenienced. Things used to disappear mysteriously, and turn up in unexpected places. Slipperton's pince-nez, for example, were lost, and found inside the piano. And Mrs. Slipperton's "false front" would be moved in the night from the dressing-table to the brass knob of the bed-post, even after she took to pinning it to the toilet cover. Things like that; irritating, but not really serious.

But the trouble increased, grew to be beyond endurance in the end. The poltergeists, with that lack of imagination which always characterises them, started to play the old trick of pulling off the Slippertons' bed-clothes in the middle of the night—one of the most annoying of the spirits' antics. And they followed that by experimenting with the heavy furniture.

I was out of England when the trouble came to a head, and I heard nothing of the later developments until after the Slippertons had left the house. I happened to meet Slipperton by accident in the Haymarket, and he took me into his club and gave me the whole story. Naturally, I was glad of the chance to investigate, although I thought it very probable that the phenomena would cease with the departure of the cook. I determined, however, to go down and spend a week in the house, alone. I was not dismayed by the fact that I should be unable to get any help with my domestic arrangements, owing to the superstitious fears of the villagers. I rather enjoyed cooking my own meals in those days.

It was fine weather in late May when I went down, and I regarded the visit as a kind of holiday rather than as a serious investigation. Nevertheless, from force of habit I carried out my inquiry in the scientific spirit that is so absolutely essential in these matters. The Slippertons' house was on the outskirts of a small town in Buckinghamshire. The shell of the house dated from the early seventeenth century. (You will find it described in the *Inventory of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments*—the second volume of the Buckinghamshire survey.) But the inside had been gutted and replanned to suit our modern requirements, such as the need for making each bedroom accessible without passing through other bedrooms, the necessity for a fitted bathroom, and so on.

I found the house as Slipperton had warned me that I should, in a chaotic condition inside. Everything movable seemed to have been moved—without any definite intention, so far as I could see, but just for the sake of upsetting the decent order of the household. I found a frying-pan, for instance, hung on the hook that was designed for the dinner-gong, and the gong inside one of the beds. A complete set of bedroom ware had been arranged on the drawing-room table; and apparently some witticism had been contemplated with a chest of drawers, which had become firmly wedged into the angle of the back staircase. In short, the usual strange feats that characterise poltergeist phenomena.

I touched none of these misplaced things with the exception of the frying-pan, which I needed to cook the sausages I had brought with me; but after I had had my meal, I went through all the rooms and entered the position of every article in a large note-book, making plans of each room, besides a full list of the furniture and ornaments it contained. Later, I went up into the roof and disconnected the water supply, afterwards emptying the cistern and all the pipes. And before I went to bed I turned off the electric light at the main switch. All these precautions, as I need hardly tell you, were absolutely essential. It might appear difficult to explain the moving of a large chest of drawers by the sound of water-pipes or the fusing of an electric wire; but the critics of psychical research have essayed far more difficult tasks than that, to their own entire satisfaction.

I went up to the bedroom the Slippertons used to occupy, a little before eleven o'clock. I had with me a couple of spare candles, a new notebook, and a fountain pen. I was even at that time, I may add, a highly trained researcher in every way, and was quite capable of taking a full shorthand report of a séance. I tried my pulse and temperature before getting into bed and found them both normal. So far, there had been no sign of any phenomena; and I was not at all nervous. Indeed, I may say that I have never been nervous with spirits.

I had brought the *Pickwick Papers* upstairs to read in bed—it is always as well to choose some book that has no kind of bearing on the subject of one's investigation—and I was in the middle of the Trial Scene when my attention was caught by the sound of something moving in the room. I had left both windows wide open and the curtains undrawn, and I thought at first that an unusually large moth had flown in and was fluttering against

the ceiling. I laid down my book, sat up and looked round the room, but I could see nothing. The night was very still, and the candle on the table by my bed burnt without a flicker. Nevertheless, the sound continued; a soft, irregular fluttering that suggested the intermittent struggle of some feeble winged creature. It occurred to me that a wounded bat or bird might have flown into the room and might be struggling on the floor out of sight near the foot of the bed. And I was about to get up and investigate when the flame of the candle sank a little, and I became aware that the temperature of the room was perceptibly colder.

I picked up my note-book at once and made an entry of the circumstances, and the exact time.

When I looked up again, the sound of fluttering had ceased and the candle was once more burning brightly; but I now perceived a kind of uncertain vagueness that was apparently trying to climb on to the rail at the foot of the bed. When I first saw it, it could not be described as a form. It had rather the effect of a patch of dark mist, with an irregular and changing outline, that obscured to a certain extent the furnishings of the room immediately behind it. I must confess, however, that my observations at this point were not so accurate as they should have been, owing to the sudden realisation of my stupidity in not having brought a camera and flashlight apparatus. The Slipper-tons had prepared me for poltergeists, and I was, at that moment, distinctly annoyed at being confronted with what I presumed to be an entirely different class of phenomenon. Indeed, I was so annoyed that I was half inclined to blow out the candle and go to sleep. I wish, now, that I had....

The Psychical Researcher paused and sighed deeply. Then producing a large note-book from his pocket, he continued, despondently:

I have got it all down here, and when I come to material that necessitates verbal accuracy, I should prefer to read my notes aloud rather than give an indefinite summary. In the first place, however, I must give you some idea of the form that gradually materialised; of the form, that is, as I originally saw it.

It took the shape, I may say, of a smallish man, grotesquely pot-bellied, with very thin legs and arms. The eyes were disproportionately large and quite circular, with an expression that was at once both impish and pathetic.

The ears were immense, and set at right angles to the head; the rest of the features indefinite. He was dressed rather in the fashion of a medieval page.

(The professor was heard to murmur, "The typical goblin," at this point, but made no further interruption.)

He sat with his feet crossed on the rail at the foot of the bed and appeared able to balance himself without difficulty. He had been sitting there for perhaps a couple of minutes, while I made various entries in my note-book before I tried the experiment of addressing him.

"Have you a message?" I asked. "If you cannot answer directly, knock once for 'No,' and three times for 'Yes,' and afterwards we can try the alphabet."

To my great surprise, however, he was able to use the direct voice. His tone was a trifle wheezy and thin at first, but afterwards gained power and clearness.

"I can hear you fairly well," he said. "Now do try to keep calm. It isn't often that one gets such a chance as this."

I will now read my notes.

Myself. "I am perfectly calm. Go on."

Spirit. "Will you try to answer my questions?"

The Researcher looked up from his note-book with a frown of impatience after reading these two entries, and said:

But perhaps I had better summarise our earlier conversation for you. There was, I may say, a somewhat long and distinctly complicated misunderstanding between myself and the spirit before the real interest of the message begins; a misunderstanding due to my complete misapprehension of our respective parts. You see, it is unhappily true—however much we may deplore the fact and try to guard against it—that even in psychical research we form habits of thought and method, but particularly of thought. And I had got into the habit of regarding communications from spirits as referring to what we assume to be the future life. Well, this communication didn't. The spirit with whom I was talking had not, in short, ever been incarnated. He was what the Spiritualists and Theosophists, and so on, call an "Elemental." And to him, I represented the future state. I was, so to speak, the communicating spirit and he the psychical researcher. He was, I inferred, very far advanced on his own plane

and expecting very shortly to "pass over," as he put it. Also, I gathered that he was in his own world by way of being an intellectual; keenly interested in the future—that is, in our present state; and that the Slipperton phenomena were entirely due to the experiments he had been carrying out ("on strictly scientific lines," he assured me) to try and ascertain the conditions of life on this plane.

Perhaps I can, now, illustrate his attitude by a few quotations from our conversation. For example:

Spirit. "Are you happy where you are?"

Myself. "Moderately. At times. Some of us are."

Spirit. "Are you yourself happy?"

Myself. "I may say so. Yes."

Spirit. "What do you do? Try and give me some idea of life on your plane."

Myself. "It varies so immensely with the individual and the set in which one lives. But we—oh! we have a great variety of what we call 'interests' and occupations, and most of us, of course, have to work for our livings."

Spirit. "I don't understand that. What are your livings, and how do you work for them?"

Myself. "We can't live without food, you see. We have to eat and drink and sleep; protect ourselves against heat and cold and the weather generally, which means clothes and shelter—garments to wear and houses to live in, that is."

Spirit. "I have inferred something of this very vaguely from my experiments. For instance, I gather that you put on hair in the daytime, and take it off when you are—where *you* are at the present time. Also, I have noticed that when the coverings which at present conceal you are pulled away, you invariably replace them. Am I to deduce from that that you try to keep your bodies warm and your heads cool at night?"

Myself. "Well, that's a trifle complicated. About the hair, you understand, some of us lose our hair—it comes out, we don't know why—in middle life, as mine has, and women and some men are rather ashamed of this and wear—er—other people's hair in the daytime to hide the defect."

Spirit. "Why?"

Myself. "Oh, vanity. We want to appear younger than we really are."

Spirit. "Why?"

The Researcher bent a little lower over his notebook as he said:

I seem to have written "Damnation" at this point; but so far as I can remember I did not speak the word aloud. You will see, however, that I tried my best to be patient in what were really the most exasperating circumstances. But I will miss the next page or two, and come to more interesting material. Ah I here:

Spirit. "This thing you call death, or dying? Am I to understand that it corresponds to what we call incarnation?"

Myself. "We are not sure. Some of us believe that our actual bodies will rise again in the flesh; others that the body perishes and the spirit survives in an uncertain state of which we have very little knowledge; others, again, that death is the end of everything."

Spirit. "In brief, you know nothing whatever about it?"

Myself. "Uncommonly little."

Spirit. "Do you remember your lives as elementals?"

Myself (definitely). "No!"

Spirit. "Then where do you suppose yourselves to begin?"

Myself. "We don't know. There are various guesses. None of them particularly likely."

Spirit. "Such as?"

Myself. "Oh, some of us believe that the soul or spirit is a special creation made by a higher power we call God, and breathed into the body at birth. And some that the soul or spirit, itself eternal, finds a temporary house in the body, and progresses from one to another with intervals between each incarnation."

Spirit. "Then this being born is what we should call dying?"

Myself. "Quite. It makes no difference. And, as a matter of fact, the overwhelming majority of us—that is to say, all but about one in every million—never bother our heads where we came from, or what's likely to happen to us when we die, or are born, as you would call it."

I have a note here that after this we were both silent for about ten minutes.

Spirit (despondently). "I wish I could get some sort of idea what you do all the time and what you think about. I thought, when I so unexpectedly got into touch with someone in the future state, that I should be able to learn everything. And I have, so far, learnt nothing—absolutely nothing. In fact, except that I have been able to correct my inferences with regard to one or two purely material experiments, I may say that I know less now than I did before. And, by the way, those things over there—he pointed to the washstand—I noticed that at certain times you go through some ceremony with them upstairs, and as I wished to discover if there was any reason why you should not perform the same ceremony downstairs, I moved the things. Well, I noticed that the spirit who was here before you was apparently very annoyed. Can you give me any explanation of that?"

Myself. "Our bodies become soiled by contact with matter, and we wash ourselves in water. We prefer to do it in our bedrooms."

Spirit. "Why?"

Myself. "We use a certain set of rooms for one purpose and another set for other purposes."

Spirit. "Why?"

Myself. "I don't know why. We do."

Spirit. "But you are sure of the fact, even if you can give no reason?"

Myself. "Absolutely."

Spirit. "I wish I could prove that. One of my fellow-scientists, who has recently been able to press his investigations even further than I have up to the present time, has recently brought forward good evidence to prove that spirits are all black, wear no coverings on their bodies, live in the simplest of dwellings, and, although they have a few ceremonies, certainly have none which in any way corresponds to that you have just described."

Myself. "He has probably been investigating the habits of the Australian aborigines."

Spirit. "What are they?"

Myself. "Men, or, as you would say, spirits, like us in a few respects, but utterly different in most."

Spirit. "Have you ever seen them?"

Myself. "No."

Spirit. "Or met anyone who has?"

Myself. "No."

Spirit. "Then this account of them tallies with nothing in your experience."

Myself. "No, but they exist all right. There's no doubt of that."

Spirit. "I question it. In any case, I could not accept your word as evidence, seeing that you have neither seen them yourself nor met with anyone who has."

And so on, you know (the Researcher muttered, flicking over the pages of his note-book).

He was infernally sceptical about those aborigines. It seems that he had had a tremendous argument with the other investigator about the possibility of "spirits" being black and naked, and he was dead set on proving that he had been right. I think, as a matter of fact, that what I said tended to confirm him in his theory. He put it that if there were such spirits on this plane, I must have seen them or have had some quite first-hand evidence of their existence; and when I said that I had seen black people, Indians, and so on, he cross-examined me until I got confused. You see, I had to confess that they weren't, strictly speaking, black, that they wore clothes, and washed, and lived in houses; and he got me involved in apparent contradictions—you have no idea how easy it is, when you are trying to be very lucid—and then he changed the subject with the remark that I was a very poor witness.

It was about this time that I began to lose my temper. It was after three o'clock when we got to that point, and I was getting very tired, and, strange as it may appear, curiously doubtful about my own existence. I had for some time been coming to the conclusion that he did not quite believe in my reality; and after he had dismissed my account of the black races as being untrustworthy, he said, half to himself, that quite probably I was nothing more than an hallucination, a thought projection of his own mind. And after that I got more and more annoyed—partly, I think, because I had a kind of haunting fear that what he had said might be true. When you have been talking to a spirit for over three hours in the middle of the night, you are liable to doubt anything.

But it was foolish of me to try and prove to him that I had a real objective existence, because obviously it wasn't possible. I tried to touch him, and my

hand went through him as if he were nothing more than a patch of mist. Then I got right out of bed and moved various articles about the room, but, as he said, that proved nothing, for if he had an hallucination about me, he might equally well have one about the things I appeared to move. And then we drifted into a futile argument as to what I looked like.

It began as a sort of test, to try if my own conception of myself tallied with his; and it didn't—not in the very least. In fact, the description he gave of me would have done very well for the typical goblin of fairy-tale, which, as I told him, was precisely how *I* saw *him*. He laughed at that, and told me that, as a matter of fact, he had no shape at all, and that my conception of him proved his description of me was the correct one, because I had visualised myself. He said that he would appear to me in any shape that I happened to be thinking of, and naturally I should be thinking of my own. And I could not disprove a thing he said; and when I looked at myself in the cheval glass, I was not at all sure that I did not look like the traditional goblin.

Well, I assure you that I felt just then as if the one possible way left to demonstrate my sanity, my very existence, was to lose my temper; and I did it very thoroughly. I raved up and down the room, knocked the furniture about, chucked my boots through him, and called him a damned elemental. And although it had no more effect upon him than if I had been in another world—as I suppose in a sense I actually was—that outbreak did help to restore my sanity.

Perhaps you may have noticed that if a man is worsted in an argument he invariably loses his temper? It is the only means he has left to convince himself that he is right. Well, my temper did that for me on this occasion. I could not prove my existence to that confounded spirit by any logic or demonstration, but I could prove it to myself by getting angry. And I did.

The Researcher glared round the circle as if challenging anyone there to deny the validity of his existence, then slapped his note-book together and sat upon it.

I do not expect you to believe my story (he concluded, with a touch of vehemence). Indeed, I would much sooner that you did not believe it. I have been trying to doubt it myself for the past eleven years, and I still hope to succeed in that endeavour, aided by my intensive study of the comforting theories of the later Victorian scientists. But I must warn you that there was

just one touch of what one might call evidence, beyond my own impressions of that night—which may have been, and probably were, a mixture of telepathy, hallucination, expectancy, and auto-suggestion, that found expression in automatic writing.

This rather flimsy piece of evidence rests upon a conclusion drawn from the end of my conversation with the spirit. I was still banging about the room, then, and I said that I had finished with psychical research, that never again would I make the least inquiry with regard to a possible future life, or any kind of spiritualistic phenomenon. And, curiously enough, the poltergeist precisely echoed my resolve. He said that that night's experience had clearly shown him that the research was useless, that it could never prove anything, and that, even if it did, no one would believe it. *For if, as he pointed out, we who were in a manner of speaking face to face, were unable to prove our own existence to each other, how could we expect to prove the other's existence to anyone else?*

It was getting light then, and he faded out almost immediately afterwards.

But it is a fact that there were no more poltergeist phenomena in that house, although the Slippertons went back to it a month or two later and still have the same cook.

Printed in Great Britain by Harell, Watson & Viney, Li., London and Aylesbury.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE PSYCHICAL
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