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Andrew Lang M. A.

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PROTEST OF A PSYCHO-FOLKLORIST.

BY ANDREW LANG, M.A.

LET me apologise for the word Psycho-Folklorist! But as the only member of the sect thus named, as a member with no "society," a being more isolated even than Davie Deans, I would mildly protest against our President's remarks on the Psychical Society, published in his printed address (*Folk-Lore*, March, 1895, pp. 78-81). Mr. Clodd asks us to condemn the "superstitions" of Dr. Alfred Wallace, Mr. Crookes, Professor Lodge, Mr. A. J. Balfour, and of all the eminent men of science, British and foreign, who support psychical research by their investigations, or, at least, by their subscriptions and adhesion. Mr. Clodd explains the fact that some of these men of science, having examined, for example, the performances of Eusapia Paladino, fail, so far, to detect their method and cause, by saying that "scientific specialists can be wholly untrustworthy observers outside their own domain." Very probably; but who, in this domain, is to be the observer? The men of science, British or foreign, are at a loss. The obvious plan is to try professional experts in conjuring, like Mr. Maskelyne, and I have reason to hope that this gentleman (whose logical fairness of mind rivals his ingenuity) may yield his assistance. Suppose, for argument's sake, that *he* is also puzzled; to what possible kind of observer would Mr. Clodd have recourse? Would he say, "To nobody, the whole affair is nonsense"? If so, I fail to agree with him.

A performance—or, if you please, a series of occurrences—which neither a crowd of men of science nor an expert in conjuring could account for, would, I think, be a phenomenon worthy of examination. But Mr. Clodd

remarks that (granting, for argument's sake, the genuineness of the phenomena) "much could be said about the absence of any contributions of the slightest value by them to our knowledge of a spirit-world." But who is talking here of a "spirit-world?" Certainly not Mr. Oliver Lodge. *He* is talking only of phenomena, and of physical phenomena. These, surely, come within the "sphere of influence" of physical science! Mr. Clodd seems to mean that we are not to investigate physical phenomena unless they contribute matter of value to our knowledge of the "spirit-world." Of course he cannot really mean that! Every province of the Psychical Society's labour appears to be regarded by Mr. Clodd as vitiated by "the old animism" in disguise, and therefore as nonsense and superstition. For example, he sneers at the practice of looking into glass balls. Now what has "the old animism" to do with the provocation of hallucinations by dint of looking at a glass ball? Just this much: The old animists, savages, and our forefathers generally, were or are acquainted with analogous practices. They, being animists, explained the hallucinations by a theory of "spirits." It does not follow that the hallucinations do not, in some cases, actually occur, any more than it follows that there is no thunder, because thunder used to be explained by the action of a "spirit" armed with a mace. That many persons are so constituted as to see hallucinations in glass balls I cannot possibly doubt, without branding some of my most intimate and least superstitious friends as habitual liars. I see nothing odd in a glass ball, but if I give my friends the lie, then I act as the dreamless Irish king would have done, had he called all men liars who averred that they could dream. Granting, then, that such hallucinations exist, why on earth should they not be studied like any other mental phenomenon? Is it because you can buy a ball for three shillings? Is it because savages explained the facts as they explained almost all facts? Or why is it?

Mr. Clodd may, of course, remark, "The facts are not to be examined, because they are not facts at all: nobody is ever hallucinated, nobody was ever hallucinated, by staring at a glass ball, a vessel of water, a drop of blood, or of ink." He seems to me to be nearly as sceptical as his own "doubting Thomases" were about the flints in the Somme Valley. But unlike M. Boucher des Perthes, I can't show him the flints *in situ*, I cannot enable him to see hallucinations in a glass ball. To be able to see them is an individual peculiarity, like having "hypnagogic illusions." If Mr. Clodd has these, he believes in their existence. Even if he has not, he probably believes, because so very many people do have them. The bulk and weight of the evidence, I cannot doubt, convince him as to hypnagogic illusions. Now glass ball visions appear to be similar illusions, but much rarer, and capable of being seen in the waking condition. To every one who thinks of it, the existence or non-existence of such subjective pictures must be matter of evidence. I have enough to satisfy myself, and perhaps, if Mr. Clodd had as much, he would be satisfied also. Therefore, to me it seems that the topic may be made the subject of experiment and study. Where does "the old animism" come in here?

For the folklorist, almost all the topics of the S. P. R. have their interest. The anthropologist, the folklorist, meets this practice and belief of "scrying" in all ages, and among races of every grade of culture. It is now in the hands of priests, now of medicine men, and what is its origin? For my part I believe its origin to be the fact that some persons can be hallucinated in the given circumstances. What is Mr. Clodd's explanation? Here we are, at least, on the common ground of folklore. If Mr. Clodd explains all by "a disordered liver," then a disordered liver is the origin of a picturesque piece of folklore. That piece of knowledge is acquired for the race.

Take another branch, take "table-turning." That, also, has been burdened by the explanations of "the old ani-

mism." But it does not follow that tables are not moved in a manner which testifies (let us say) to the strange amount of muscular energy which may be unconsciously expended and unconsciously directed. The phenomenon, in that case, of unconscious muscular action deserves study, and here at least I have Dr. Carpenter on my side. Here too we are in full folklore, and Mr. Clodd may compare, among many similar sources, Dr. Codrington's account of native Melanesian experiments with modern table-turning. Let us suppose (for the sake of argument) that neither physicists nor conjurers can explain Eusapia's performances. Certainly not I, and, I imagine, not Mr. Lodge, nor M. Richet, nor any of the Continental *savants* who are at present in a quandary, will leap to an animistic explanation. But, as a veteran folklorist, I would say, "Whatever causes these Eusapian phenomena, probably caused some of the innumerable similar phenomena of which all folklore is full." I don't care what the cause is, from sleight of hand to the action of demons, I only say, the same cause was probably active at Tedworth, at Epworth, at Rerrick, at Spraiton, in the cases recorded in witch trials, and so forth.

What is Mr. Clodd's explanation of these narratives, savage or civilised? If he denies that there were ever any of these *physical* phenomena, is their invention a necessary myth? Does it arise from a disease of language? Aetiological it cannot be, for it is not an explanation, but a statement of facts, of which the animistic explanation was given, as usual. Was all done by trickery? If so, how? In Eusapia's case, by examination we might find out. Thus, to myself, as a folklorist, Eusapia (and Home too) are vastly interesting. They could *do the trick* (whatever it is) which underlies a long chapter of folklore. Now, if Mr. Lodge, or M. Ochorowicz, or Professor Sidgwick, or Mr. Maskelyne (on whom I more rely) can find out that trick, he will have done service to folklorists. I am well aware that many tricks have been discovered, but these

do not cover the facts as alleged in folklore, or as alleged by Mr. Lodge, and many other men of science.

Take another even more extreme example, the folklore of levitation. Some man or woman is seen by witnesses, who often give evidence on oath, to rise in the air and stay therein. I have elsewhere shown that this story is as widely distributed as any *Märchen*.

Then comes D. D. Home, and professes to do the trick. What an opportunity for a folklorist! One can imagine a President of the Folk-Lore Society rushing eagerly to examine Mr. Home, and to explain, at once and for ever, the origin of this chapter in folklore. For (if he is lucky enough to find Mr. Home in form) either he will expose the trick, or he will, at least, be able to say, "certainly some men can make on our senses the impression which is the cause of the world-wide tale of levitation." Well, the Folk-Lore Society is too young; in Home's day we had no Folk-Lore Society. But Mr. Crookes, a distinguished man of science, acted as a good folklorist. He went to see Mr. Home. I have rarely been more curiously impressed than when I heard Mr. Crookes very gravely aver that he had seen Mr. Home rise in air, in full light, in a drawing room, had felt all round his body, and had discovered no material supports. Here was a gentleman whose word science accepts to a millimetre for accuracy of observation, yet he tells us this! And he is only one out of dozens.

"Here," I said to myself, "is the explanation of the large folklorist and hagiological chapters about levitation. What was good enough for Mr. Crookes was good enough for Australian blacks, Presbyterians, Celts, Platonists, Peruvians, Catholics, Puritan divines, and all the other witnesses. They, or some of them, had received the impression which Mr. Crookes received; hence the stories."

What is Mr. Clodd's explanation?

Pray observe that "old animism" has no place in my

mind here. I deal with an impression of a physical phenomenon, an impression which, as can be proved, is deeply printed on the folklore of the whole world. As to how that impression was made on Mr. Crookes's senses I have not even a guess, but I believe firmly that it *was* made, and that similar impressions account for the folklore of our stories from witnesses of levitation. Therefore I, for one, applaud Mr. E. B. Tylor, as a folklorist, for having, like Mr. Lodge, attended *séances*. I call him not "superstitious," but "scientific," and, if nothing occurred, that does not make him more scientific or less superstitious. Mr. Darwin's own mind was open on the matter. He said that it would take a great deal of evidence to convince him; he did not say that he would decline to look at evidence altogether.

It may be asked, "Why don't I go to see Eusapia myself?" I answer, "Because I am a very inexact observer, or rather, because I do not observe at all, and therefore my evidence would be of value neither to myself nor to the public."

Again, I presume that Mr. Clodd does not deny the possibility of inducing artificial slumber without the use of drugs, and of making suggestions which have the force of reality to the patient? If he denies it, if he says with Lord Kelvin that hypnotism is all imposture and malobservation, I am silenced, except from bad words. But if he cannot carry scepticism to that pitch, then I think that the facts, as far as he admits them, account for much that occurs in folklore, namely for tales of "glamour," and for the behaviour of the so-called "bewitched" patients. Thus folklore and psychical research are again on common ground. Yet where comes in "the old animism"? Or will Mr. Clodd say, "There is nothing at all in hypnotism, nothing at all in the evidence of Mr. Crookes, except survival from the mental condition of savagery. Mr. Crookes, under that inherited stress, deceived himself, and thought he saw what he did not see. The countless French, Ger-

man, and Italian *savants* who write on hypnotism are all in the same condition, all slaves of hereditary instincts, and victims of the survival of the *unfittest* ideas." It would be odd that the least "fit" of all ideas should "survive" with such vigour!

Conceivably, though not probably, Mr. Clodd may explain, at least, Mr. Crookes's view of the floating Home in this way. Let it be so, is it not worth while to examine a survival, or inherited capacity, which can make a sane man of science tell such a tale, and be "in a tale" with savages and priests. I can imagine few studies more useful both to psychology and folklore, psychology dealing with the individual patient, folklore with the symptoms as exhibited by the race. Our business is to examine myths and the mythopœic faculty. Here, to our President's mind, is Mr. Crookes's inherited mythopœic faculty flaring up in the most astonishing of myths, and that a myth of universal diffusion. Surely this deserves study!

If I do not misjudge Mr. Clodd, his real or chief objection to psychical research is that all its followers, with different "degrees of certainty," believe "in the validity of phenomena purporting to be '*caused by spiritual beings, together with the belief thence arising of the community of the living and the so-called dead.*'" The words in italics Mr. Clodd quotes from Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, whose writings on the subject seem, to myself, to be very far from critical or judicious. One may be a psycho-folklorist, without accepting, or heeding, what phenomena may "purport" to be. Never mind what they "purport" to be, that is, never mind attending to the old animistic explanation of them. The question for the psycho-folklorist is, "Are there such phenomena? If so, do they throw light on the problems of folklore?"

In my opinion there are such phenomena. What Mr. Lodge witnessed was a set of phenomena, how caused is not the present, or folklore question. To the folklorist

this is the point: the trick can be done so as to puzzle dozens of modern sceptical *savants*. Much more, then, must it have puzzled our unscientific ancestors. Similar tricks, then, or similar phenomena similarly produced, were at the bottom of the Epworth, Tedworth, Rerrick, Spraiton, and a thousand other events in folklore. Indeed, in my opinion, we shall not understand great masses of folklore till psychical research has swept out a dozen of obscure corners in the edifice of human faculty. The S. P. R. asks for phenomena on good evidence. It passes no judgment (as a rule and as a Society) on what they "purport" to be. They may be turnip heads hollowed and accommodated with a candle. In this protest is there a word of "old animism"? I am not, alas, omniscient. I do not *know* that poor old animism has absolutely nothing to say for itself; nor is even Mr. Clodd really omniscient and infallible. But I am arguing that folklore and psychical research have much common ground, and if the S. P. R. can learn nothing from the F. L. S., perhaps the F. L. S. may pick something useful out of the "bye-products" of the S. P. R. If the researchers are only survivals, what else but survivals do we study? Let me put a case to Mr. Clodd. If we meet rustics who are treasures of traditional beliefs and observances, we do not discourage or laugh at, but cherish and fondly observe, them. They are survivals! In the same way, taking Mr. Lodge, F.R.S., the learned Professor Sidgwick, the poetic Mr. Myers, the healing genius of M. Richet as (on this ground) mere survivals of old animistic philosophy, why should we discourage *them*? If the censures of our President smote the conscience of these worthy but retrograde physicists, physicians, and so on, if they ceased to carry on what Mr. Clodd thinks their foolish old business, I deem that we should be depriving ourselves of raw material.

Perhaps the conductors of *Folk-Lore* do not agree with Mr. Clodd. In the December number they publish an

article on "Ghostly Lights," by Mr. M. J. Walhouse. Now ghostly lights have very naturally been studied by our friends—my friends, at least—of the S. P. R. Thus we and they are on common ground: each society can add to the information of the other.

There is, I admit, and I regret it, a difference of method. Our method is to run on thus: "The Irish say, the Welsh say, the Burmese say, the Shanars say, the Negroes say, that there are such and such phenomena;" and there we leave it, with a remark on will-o'-the-wisps or on fire-flies.

The S. P. R., on the other hand, works thus: "The Rev. W. Brown, and Miss Laetitia Sparks, and Colonel Macpherson, and a lady who declines to give her name for publication, allege that they have seen such and such phenomena," analogous to those reported by our peasants and savages, and by Plato and so on. The S. P. R. then cross-examines these witnesses, rejects some, accepts others, and there *it* leaves it. The F. L. S. reviles the S. P. R.'s ghostly lights, and the S. P. R. never dreams of comparing the F. L. S.'s "non-evidential" ghostly lights, with its own authentic phenomena.

Then comes the psycho-folklorist, namely the present humble philosopher. Then I find that what the people of Thuringia or the Irish report concerning *a hand carrying a light* is also reported by Dr. Spears, and other friends of the late clerical medium, the Rev. Stainton Moses. They saw the same phenomenon in their own drawing-room. Both societies neglect the obvious *rapprochement*, which must have *some* meaning if we could interpret it. Thus, is there a common form of hallucination, or did Mr. Moses fake up a hand and a light, following consciously the folklore model? Or did he repeat a traditional form of imposture? Or did the eye-witnesses plagiarise from folklore? Or is Mr. Clodd's explanation correct? Did a "dominant idea"—in Dr. Spears—"suspend and narcotise

the reason and judgment, and contribute to the rise and spread of another of the epidemic delusions of which history supplies warning examples?"

If Mr. Clodd's view be correct, with what gratitude should we thank the S. P. R. for providing us with nascent epidemic delusions *in situ*, as it were, so that we may compare these with similar delusions in history.

Here I offer an example: is it folklore, or is it in the province of physical research, or of natural history, or of all three? It occurs in a letter from a correspondent: the rest of the epistle is concerned with Indian conjuring performers.

"There is also a little bit of folklore which may interest you and on which I should be glad to be more fully informed, but no one as yet has been able to help me. I was staying on a tea-garden near Darjiling last year, and one evening as we were walking round the flower-garden (which is part of a small piece of ground on which the bungalow stands, and which is surrounded on three sides by a steep mound) our eyes were caught by a light like that of a lantern being carried down the path which leads to the vegetable garden some 200 feet below. My host sent for the "Mahli," who came down from his house, which is on the fourth side where the hill rises about the bungalow, and asked him what business anyone had to be going to the vegetable garden at that time? "Oh;" said the man, "that is one of the 'chota-admis'" (*i.e.* little men); and on being asked to explain, he said that these little men lived underground, and only came out at night. He did not appear to be very clear as to what their occupation was, but they always walk or fly about with lanterns. They are about three feet high, and they will never allow anyone to get near them; but if by any chance one was to come upon them unexpectedly, they would quickly disappear, and the person who saw them would soon become ill and probably die. They are constantly about on dark nights, sometimes as many as twenty or thirty together; but he and all other

natives always gave them a wide berth. Whilst he was speaking we watched the light, which apparently left the path, and in two or three minutes flew across to another portion of the hill, between which and the vegetable garden was a steep dip which would take an ordinary individual at least half an hour to descend and ascend the other side; then it disappeared, and we saw no more that night, but two or three times afterwards we saw similar lights, sometimes carried along the paths and at others flying across the dips in the hills. We made enquiries from the natives, who all told the same tale; but when we asked other planters they could tell us nothing about them. The light was too large and not erratic enough for any firefly that we had seen in that neighbourhood, more like a lantern than anything else that we could think of."

Here is a phenomenon, and here is an animistic theory. Folklore classes the narrative with tales of ghostly lights, and leaves it there. . . . Psychical research, if it notices the story, tries to get more evidence about it. . . . Both studies are on the same ground.

One more example, and my case is closed.

Last year Mr. Basil Thomson sent me his *South Sea Yarns*, with the tale of how he saw, in a religious ceremony, Fijians march unscorched through a trench filled with stones on which a great fire had been lighted. The stones were hot enough to scorch a handkerchief laid on them, but they neither harmed the Fijians nor even burned their ankle fillets of dry fern. That same day a Bulgarian gentleman told me of a similar rite in rural Bulgaria. . . . Virgil, as you know, mentions an exactly parallel religious performance. Mr. Laing, from New Zealand, refers me to the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, vols. ii. and iii., with a photograph of the fire-walkers. Mr. Thomson, by the way, also sent me a photograph, which I exhibit, with the scorched handkerchief.

In these cases an animistic theory explains, among

RELIGIOUS CEREMONY IN FIJI.

savages and Romans, the failure of fire to burn. . I shall not trouble you with cases from saintly legend, from the Bible, from missionary records, from mediæval ordeals, or from Iamblichus. These stories are surely within the province of folklore. But, as soon as they are told on the evidence of living and honourable men, psychical research also examines them. Now, what is the folklorist's attitude to be? Is he to refuse to listen to Mr. Thomson, Mr. Crookes (in Home's case), the writers in the *Polynesian journal*, Father Brébeuf, and others, merely because they say that they have seen phenomena of which savages and others give an animistic explanation? Here is on one side a folklore belief in certain phenomena. On the other side is the evidence, to the same phenomena, of cameras and of the eyes of living and distinguished men. Surely the cause which makes Mr. Thomson and the rest tell their story, is the cause which inspires folklore tradition to the same effect. And what is that cause? I do not think that folklore should be careless to know merely because psychical research is curious to know.

My conclusion is that certain obscure facts are, or may be, at the bottom of many folklore beliefs. Since psychical research investigates the alleged facts, as a folklorist I welcome in her an ally. Already, in my opinion, psychical research has explained the world-wide practice of *specularii*, the tales of magic mirrors, by showing that, as a matter of every-day fact, a proportion of persons can provoke hallucinations by looking into a clear deep. When Sir Walter Scott, a folklorist, intended to investigate this phenomenon in Egypt, he became, in intention, a psychical researcher. Are we to condemn him?

What I cannot understand is this: as long as a savage, mediæval, or classical belief (as in Fire-Walking) rests only on tradition it interests the folklorist. As soon as contemporary evidence of honourable men avers that the belief reposes on a fact, Folklore drops the subject. Psychical

Research then takes it up, because a "psychical" explanation of the phenomenon has been given by mystics. I can understand why Psychical Researchers become interested, but I cannot see why Folklorists cease to be interested. Whatever else the Fire-Walk may be, it is a piece of folklore. When psychical students are accused, *en masse*, of approaching their subjects with a dominant prejudice, the charge, to me, seems inaccurate (as a matter of fact) and, moreover, very capable of being retorted. Not the man who listens to evidence, but the man who refuses to listen (as if he were, at least negatively, omniscient) appears to me to suffer from a dominant prejudice. M. Boucher des Perthes was notoriously prejudiced in favour of palaeolithic weapons. Were the *savants* unprejudiced who refused to give him a hearing? Of all things, modern popular science has most cause to beware of attributing prejudice to students who refuse its Shibboleth.

A REPLY TO THE FOREGOING "PROTEST."

BY THE PRESIDENT.

MR. LANG'S "Protest" is, in the main, directed against my statement that modern psychism is but savage animism "writ large." It is that statement which I have to attempt to justify. In connection with it I shall seek to show that my "real or chief objection to psychical research" is not, as Mr. Lang surmises, that its followers "believe in the validity of phenomena which purport to be caused by spiritual beings." Of course they can believe what they like. My objection is *not* to the *research*, but to the *method* of it, which under the guise of the scientific, is pseudo-scientific. The Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1882. The Folk-Lore Society had then been in existence four years. Professor Sidgwick, in his Inaugural Address to the new Society, laid stress on the importance