

THE FOUNTAIN OF SPIRITUALISM

BY PATRICK KEARNEY

DURING the last century the United States gave three so-called religions to the world. One of these, Mormonism, has never reached a large public, but has always been confined to a small but hearty group in a restricted area. The success of the second, Christian Science, has been great in America, but not very noticeable anywhere else. It is only the third that has reached a world-wide popularity, and that popularity is unique in modern religious history in that not a few men of science, presumably sane and intelligent, have succumbed. Camille Flammarion, the French astronomer, is one such. Sir Oliver Lodge is another. The late Sir William Crookes was a third. And then there are Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the late Prof. Hyslop, and Henry Holt, the publisher. Even Havelock Ellis has become convinced of the existence of auras and ectoplasm, and Sir Gilbert Murray is said to be hovering on the edge with his conversion to a belief in mental telepathy.

This wide acceptance of the new revelation among educated men is all the more charming when we recall that its origins were extremely lowly. Its messiahs, in fact, were two small and ignorant country girls, Margaret and Catherine Fox, and they launched it in 1848 in a little farmhouse in Wayne county, New York. If you walk into any Spiritualist church in America today you will see somewhere on the walls a framed parchment, the official license from the National Spiritualists' Association. This license bears the great seal of the association, and that seal shows a drawing of a little house,

and the words "Fox Home, 1848." Thus all true believers give constant testimony to their reverence for the founders of their faith and for the place of its birth. The house itself was until a few years ago located near the village of Arcadia, in New York State, but in 1916, through the generosity of B. F. Bartlett, a wealthy spiritualist of Camden, N. J., it was taken down and removed, by "pious, reverent hands," as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle says, to Lily Dale, New York, the national centre of spiritualism, where it was restored and is now used as a museum.

"The Fox home will always be a sacred shrine to spiritualists," says M. E. Cadwallader, an ecstatic believer, "because in that humble home it first became manifested that the dead return and communicate with us." Indeed, it is more than a local shrine; it is, according to another writer, W. J. Colville, "one of the glories of the mighty Empire State and of Lily Dale that this old historic cottage, restored from the ravages of almost seventy years, stands in a sheltered nook, surrounded by trees, in one of the loveliest districts of the land. And thither many repair, seeking, and not in vain, ever-continuing proofs of that undying verity which so humbly and unexpectedly was revealed to an incredulous but hungry multitude, in the pioneer days of that great spiritual revelation which is now dispersing the last lingering shades of incredulity." These quotations are from a book called "Hydesville in History," an official spiritualist publication, written by pious hands.

There is no doubt that Hydesville and the Fox sisters have a place in history.

The true story of the house, indeed, constitutes an important chapter in the history of human credulity, and offers many hints to the student of religious delusion. For the beginnings of spiritualism are not, like the origins of so many other religions, shrouded in mystery. The whole story, from beginning to end, is available in the form of unquestionable documents and full and accurate contemporary reports. Margaret Fox's own confession, corroborated by her sister Catherine, her public recantation and exposure of her methods, and the entire life story of the two (written by another, but officially approved by them) are easily accessible. These documents, of course, are never referred to in the writings of the spiritualists. Hydesville and the Fox sisters are revered, but the confessions are not discussed. The following account, therefore, based on the authentic documents, may serve to fill a gap in the contemporary accounts of spiritualism.

II

In the year 1848 the little frame house known locally as "Hydesville" was occupied by a well-to-do farmer, J. D. Fox, and his family. The two younger children, Margaret, aged eight, and Catherine, at this time six and a half, were merry and mischievous and delighted in jokes on their elders. Their nurse, Elizabeth, was the particular butt of their humor, and much childish ingenuity went into teasing her. One of their favorite games was to jump out of bed as soon as she had left the room, make a great deal of noise, and then get back before she could catch them. Of course, they denied having made the noises. But finally she caught them, and the deception had to end.

The children soon discovered a new device. They tied apples to strings and concealed them under the bed-clothes. As soon as the nurse turned her back they dropped the apples out on the far side of the bed. Then, when she went to look for what had dropped, they pulled them back under the

covers. All the time, of course, they pretended to be asleep. This trick baffled the honest nurse, whom future hagiographers of the religion will perhaps honor as the patron saint of the later scientific investigation committees. She reported to Mrs. Fox that she had heard inexplicable noises in the room. So the mother came to investigate, and the children, delighting in being able to tease their elders, gave an excellent performance. It was so successful, in fact, that they decided to invent new and more ingenious devices. Very soon, sure enough, they made the discovery that was to make religious history. They found that by manipulating the joints of their fingers, in contact with the wooden bedstead, they could produce loud noises without apparently moving their hands. And, says Margaret, "from trying it with our fingers we went on to trying it with our feet, and soon learned that with practice we could make even louder raps in this way."

Then came the historic night of March 31, 1848. Mrs. Fox was awakened at midnight by loud noises coming from the children's room. There were raps, resonant, loud, persistent, rhythmic. She came to investigate. The raps continued, the children concealing their wickedness under innocent faces. Mrs. Fox was puzzled, then frightened. She asked: "Are these raps made by a human being? Rap twice for No, three times for Yes." Clear and distinct came the answer: "Rap—rap!" "Are you a disembodied spirit?" asked Mrs. Fox, nearly frightened to death, and the answer came "Yes!" Margaret relates that "until mother first suggested it, we had no thought of spirits. We were too young and too innocent to imagine such a thing." But once suggested, the idea amused them, and when the questions came "Are you the spirit of a murdered man? Were you murdered in this house?" the answers came "Yes."

Mrs. Fox rushed from the house and called in the neighbors. Within a few hours every yokel within miles had arrived. The

children enjoyed this uproar but began to be frightened by it—and didn't know how to stop it. One of the visitors invented the idea of spelling out words by raps corresponding to the letters of the alphabet, and the children, led step by step into something they had never planned, spelled out in reply the story of a pedlar who was supposed to have been killed by a local peasant named Bell. The next day everyone started digging in the cellar for the pedlar's bones, and poor Bell was looked on with such suspicion that he had to leave town. "Of course they didn't find any bones," said Margaret in telling the story. "There weren't any. We just answered whatever came into our heads."

Before a week had passed the Fox home was nationally famous. The local celebrities, doctors, lawyers and merchants, saw the manifestations and made out affidavits that they were genuine, and the newspapers flashed the news around the world. "It had gone so far before we realized it," said Margaret, "that we couldn't confess without making many people very angry." And now the comedy was put on a commercial basis by the arrival of an older sister, Leah, twenty-three years Margaret's senior, who rushed home as soon as she heard of her family's celebrity. Leah, with a shrewd eye for business, saw a fortune in the two children. She locked herself up with them in the bedroom and made them show her how they produced the raps, and tried to learn herself. Years later Margaret, with touching professional pride, reported that Leah never did get very good at the rapping, because she hadn't started young enough.

Leah took the girls to Rochester, hired the largest hall there and gave a demonstration. It made a sensation, and it was followed by private sittings, at which they took in two hundred dollars a night. Spiritualism had caught on. In a few weeks it was heard of in Europe. For the world was waiting a new revelation at that time. Mesmerism, the rage of the decade preceding, had begun to fade, and everywhere

there were mesmerists out of jobs. One and all, they promptly turned mediums. Spirit circles were formed everywhere. Ministers of the gospel became eager converts, and began preaching the new revelation from the pulpits; the country was flooded with pamphlets. Rappers appeared on all hands, and soon an improvement was made in England by the discovery of table-tipping. "Clairopathy"—the spirit healing of disease—also sprang up, and immediately became enormously lucrative. From the advertisements of the day I discover that five dollars was the fee for a "clairopathic diagnosis and treatment, given by the finest mediums." And interest in the movement was not confined to the vulgar. Some of the most distinguished men and women of the day, including Fenimore Cooper, Horace Greeley, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, became regular attendants at sittings.

Other mediums appeared with more astonishing manifestations than the Fox children could produce, but none was so popular as they were, for no one disputed their claim to have originated what had almost immediately become a new and organized religion. In 1851 came the first scientific investigation of its miracles. The University of Buffalo appointed a committee from the medical faculty, composed of Doctors Austin Flint, Charles Lee, and C. B. Coventry. With a degree of common sense seldom met with in later investigations, the doctors promptly reported that the rappings were produced by muscular movements of the legs and feet. They proved their point by putting pillows under the girls' feet, when of course there were no raps. A little later the Boston *Courier* conducted another investigation, appointing a committee of which Professor Agassiz was the head, and this committee made the same report.

But the Fox sisters were too firmly established in public fame, and the new religion was now too popular, for the craze to be affected by an exposure. So little effect did these investigations have, in fact, that in

1854 a petition was presented to the United States Senate, bearing 15,000 signatures, requesting that the government take official recognition of the new discovery. The motion was tabled.

And so the Fox sisters went on until 1855, when there occurred a romantic turning point in their lives.

III

One night Horace Greeley took his friend Elisha Kent Kane, the Arctic explorer, to see the sisters. At this time they were fifteen and thirteen, and charming and lovely. Both Greeley and Kane were captivated. Greeley was especially interested in Catherine and he offered to send her away to school. In spite of Leah's attempts to stop her, Catherine accepted, and so left the profession. Later she married and never returned to it.

Kane, who was in his early thirties, handsome and distinguished, found that the long Arctic nights had not cooled his warm heart. He fell in love with Margaret, and immediately conceived the project of removing her from her present life and educating her to be his wife. But she was not easily persuaded. Kane, who knew from the first that the rappings were fraudulent, pleaded with her to give them up. First, he pointed out to her, it was wicked to deceive; second, she was sure to be found out soon or late. After some months of argument he departed on a polar expedition, and Margaret continued her rappings. But Kane found a way to reach her heart. Out amid the ice-bergs he wrote a series of poems which were intended to lead her to repent. They were entitled "Thoughts That Ought to be Those of Maggie Fox." A quotation will make it obvious that even the Founder of Spiritualism could not long resist such a lover:

So long my secret I have kept
I can't forsake it now.
It festers in my bosom,
It cankers in my heart;
Thrice cursed is the slave fast chained to a
deceitful art!

With the poems were letters filled with pleading. "You were not meant for a life of deception. Give it up, Maggie, before you are lost forever. . . . You are too good for the life you are leading. You have deceived thousands of people." He described seances he had attended in which people fainted with horror, and he pointed out to her that she, and she alone, was responsible. When he returned from his expedition Margaret was penitent. She made a solemn compact with him to give up rapping, and though for reasons which are not now discoverable Kane did not go through a public legal ceremony, they entered into a common law marriage in the presence of her mother and father. A few weeks afterwards Kane sailed for England, intending to send for Margaret soon afterward. But hardly had he arrived there when a cable came telling of his sudden death.

Margaret struggled on in rectitude for some time, but she was left without means of support, and soon she was encumbered with a son for whom she had to provide. Finally, against her conscience and under pressure from Leah, who had never learned to rap very well and was having small success, she returned to mediumship. The son, too, was drawn into the profession: Leah would give him a piece of paper, and a little later spirit messages would be found written on it.

Years passed, and during them Margaret was haunted by a real ghost, the memory of her adored Captain Kane, whose accusing eyes were always before her. Her conscience tortured her; she began to drink heavily, but could find no solace. Finally, wasted and disheartened by this inner struggle, she broke with Leah, retired from spiritualism, and entered the Roman Catholic Church. But all around her, all over the world, were the evidences of her guilt. In all innocence, as a little child, she had started the spiritualist deception, and now it mocked her on every side. Though she was now undergoing desperate poverty for her convictions, she came to

feel more and more keenly that she could atone only by undoing what she had done. She decided to strike a death-blow at spiritualism. She would make a full public confession, expose spiritualism for good and all, and restore men to their senses once again. Only by doing this could she find peace.

Those who have read George Moore's "The Brook Kerith" remember the scene in which Jesus tries to convince Paul that his beliefs are founded on a lie. Jesus assures him that He did not die on the cross nor rise from the dead; He shows him the marks of the nails and pleads with him to renounce a religion founded on a falsehood. Paul denounces Him and goes on. The psychological truth of Moore's artistic fiction is strikingly illustrated in what follows, for from now on Margaret's story exactly parallels it.

IV

On September 24, 1888, Margaret gave an interview to the New York *Herald* announcing her intention to expose spiritualism. She blamed the whole deception on her sister Leah:

She made me do it. She is my damnable enemy. I hate her! My God, I could poison her. No, I wouldn't, but I'll lash her with my tongue. I loathe the thing I have done. I was too honest to remain a medium. I am very poor, but I am going into this as a holy war. I intend to expose spiritualism as my sacred duty. If I can't do it, who can?—I, who started it? I am living only for the time when I can show the world by personal demonstration that all spiritualism is a delusion. It is a branch of legerdemain, but it has to be studied to gain perfection. No one but a young child could do it as well as we did. I have seen so much deception. When I wake up I brood on it. That is why I want to prove that it is all fraud of the worst description.

Catherine was also interviewed, and though she had long ago retired, she said she was happy that Margaret was at last going to expose it. "I regard it as one of the greatest curses the world has ever known. Spiritualism is a humbug from beginning to end. We started it as little children when we didn't know any better.

We got started and others made us keep it up." On the night of October 21, 1888, Margaret appeared at the Academy of Music, New York, before a crowded hall. Spiritualists in the audience made attempts at heckling, but they were subdued by the police. Margaret, broken in health, weeping, almost unable to speak, sobbed out her confession:

There are many here tonight who will scorn me for the depths to which I have descended, yet did they know the true history of my unhappy past, the living agony and shame it has been to me, they would pity and not reproach me.

The imposture I have so long maintained began in my childhood when I was too young to know right from wrong. I repented in my youth. I have lived through years of silence, of intimidation, concealing as best I could my guilt. Now, thanks to God, I am at last able to reveal the truth.

I am here tonight as the founder of spiritualism to denounce it as an absolute falsehood from beginning to end, as the flimsiest of superstitions, the most wicked blasphemy known to the world.

The rappings are simply the result of perfect control of the muscles below the knee, which govern the tendons of the foot and allow an action of toe and ankle bones that is not generally known. . . .

I hope that this statement, coming solemnly from the first and most successful in this deception, will break the rapid growth of spiritualism and prove it all a fraud and delusion.

Margaret then invited committees on the stage, and demonstrated how the raps were produced. She allowed physicians to hold her ankles while she rapped out spirit messages on a small table. On the day after the demonstration she gave to the newspapers a signed statement containing the full story of her life from the beginning. Thousands of letters poured in upon her, some denouncing her, others thanking her. Leah came out with vicious attacks on her story and on her moral character. There is no question that the spiritualist ranks were depleted. But real believers were unconvinced.

The death-blow, in fact, failed to kill. Believers persuaded themselves that the Roman Church, by its celebrated strong-arm methods, had forced Margaret into a public lie. But the finest rebuttal of all, and the one which undoubtedly saved spiritualism in its greatest crisis, came from

Henry J. Newton, president of the First Spiritualist Society of New York:

If she says these things about her own feats she lies! I and other men of truth have seen her many times under conditions where there was no possibility of fraud.

She says she produces the rappings with her feet. It's a lie! Why, I have seen her produce raps many times when she was too drunk to move her feet!

Some years later, under the pressure of continued poverty, Margaret is said to have recanted her confession. I can find no authentic record of the recantation, but Houdini, in his book "A Magician Among the Spirits," says that a personal friend of Margaret's told him it was made after intimidation and bribery by Newton. The recantation was neglected by the newspapers and never officially recorded. Margaret died soon afterward, in poverty and obscurity.

In 1898, on the fiftieth anniversary of the first rappings, the spiritualists of America made a pilgrimage to the Fox home. In the humble little cottage prayers were said, hymns were sung, and demonstrations were given.

There is one more incident in the story. When pious hands tore down the house to remove it to Lily Dale the skeleton of a man was found in the cellar. Beside it were a tin box and a crowbar. This, of course, was the murdered pedlar, whom earnest seekers seventy years before had failed to find! These precious relics were removed with the house to Lily Dale, where they are still exposed before the eyes of the faithful. As human skeletons and tin boxes are not rare, it is interesting to guess at what moment in those seventy years they were buried in the cellar.

But it is only fair to give the spiritualists the last word, so I shall quote again M. E. Cadwallader in "Hydesville in History":

And thus the fiery cross carried by the hands of unseen messengers sped from point to point, the beacon fires lighted by invisible hands gleamed on every mountain top, and the low muffled sounds of the spirit raps that first broke the slumbers of the peaceful inhabitants of that humble cottage became the clarion call that sounded out to the millions of the Western hemisphere, the anthem of the soul's immortality, chorused by hosts of God's bright ministering angels!

THE ARTS AND SCIENCES

Poetry

THE SONG-MAKER OF A CONTINENT

By LUIS MUÑOZ MARÍN

THE recent adventures of Don José Santos Chocano, "the poet of America" as he calls himself without challenge south of the Rio Grande, throw into sharp relief his relationship, at once arresting and amusing, to the gathering movement for Latin-American unity. In 1920 he trained the guns of the dictator Estrada Cabrera's fortress against the insurgent populace of Guatemala. The triumphant revolutionists captured him, threw him into prison, and were contemplating his execution with a not unjustifiable gusto, when a tremor went down the Andes, "the backbone of America," as another poet prevented Chocano from calling them, and eloquent cablegraphic protests began to pour into Guatemala City. Chocano must be spared. The blood of "the poet of America" must not stain the swords of those who had fought for freedom in America.

The revolutionists had caught that poet shooting at them, it seems, in a particularly wanton manner; but what of that? The public opinion of Latin-America, usually so scattered and ineffectual, asserted its power unequivocally—and Chocano's death had to be regretfully postponed. He was released a few months later, a martyr of some sort in his own eyes—as he tells us in his own verse—if in nobody else's.

One year after his release we find him being officially crowned in Lima as the poet of America. A great festival saw the gold laurel crown of Apollo pass from the hands of President Leguía—another dictator—to the brow of Chocano amid the general applause of Latin-America—serious applause qualified by very few smiles. Well

authenticated rumor has it that seventy thousand dollars accompanied the crown as the substance of the symbol. Later, in Bogotá, the municipal council, at the suggestion of the poet (as another worthy rumor tells us) added a touch of bright tropical color to the crown by mounting some emeralds among its leaves. Leaving Colombia, Chocano then became the trusted employé of Juan Vicente Gómez, the most primitive despot in two worlds. Gómez employed him to spend a year "singing the glory of Bolívar, the liberator of America." Chocano does not care who make the laws of a nation, so long as they pay him for making the songs.

Illusions, I fear, are no longer entertained about him in Latin-America. Everyone realizes that if he knows anything better than the soul of his people it is which side his bread is buttered on. And yet there was that great feverish protest against his execution, and there was the genuine enthusiasm at his coronation in Lima. Evidently, Latin-Americans do not confuse their morality with their æsthetics. But there is more in it than this. Their dawning emotional consciousness of a continental nationality finds its most bracing support in the songs of this great poet and petty adventurer. The man must not be allowed to blur the message. All personal weaknesses must be forgiven him, for in his song twenty isolated, chauvinistic, and often squabbling republics meet on common ground—their Spanish conquistadores, their vanquished Indians, their whole Indo-Hispanic outlook on life. To dispense with Chocano would be to lose the subtlest coördinating force in Latin-America today.

It is characteristic of both him and his public that he takes and they accept un-