

I.

INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORTS OF
SITTINGS WITH MRS. THOMPSON.

BY DR. OLIVER LODGE, F.R.S.

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FROM time to time an oral account has been given at meetings of the Society by various members of their experiences with the lady living at Hampstead, Mrs. Thompson, who has been good enough to allow a few personally introduced friends to sit with her for the purpose of observing and recording the phenomena of so-called mediumship which developed themselves in connection with her; but so far no publication in the *Proceedings* of any of these records has been made.

This delay is in accordance with the usual practice of the Society in dealing with the most important cases which come under its investigation, opportunity being thus afforded for fuller light, in whatever direction, to manifest itself. Mrs. Piper was under investigation for several years before any report of her powers was published; and though her case was different, being that of a paid medium, it is obvious that the same kind of caution should be exercised, and similar opportunity for growing experience should, if possible, be afforded, in any case which appears to be of the first evidential rank.

The records of sittings with Mrs. Thompson now published constitute only a small proportion of the whole, but they represent some of those of which the notes were most carefully and exactly made; and they give a fair idea or sample of the nature of the phenomenon—both at its best and at its worst,—though indeed some private episodes in unreported sittings are held, by those with personal knowledge of them, to be far superior to any here recorded.

The delay in this case has been useful since it has afforded opportunity for Dr. Hodgson to have six sittings with Mrs. Thompson. These appear to have been of the kind above denominated “worst,” and his report is decidedly unfavourable; indeed, he is strongly of opinion that there was nothing of any value in them at all, and that they suggest that in other cases also knowledge believed to have been

of supernormal origin might be traced to normal sources of information if the sitters had been equally competent. This being so, it is important to have the fact recorded in our first publication; and it has been the wish of Mrs. Thompson herself that everything, whether favourable or unfavourable, should be impartially published. Reference to her letter in the *Journal* for November, 1901, will show the admirable position which she takes up in such matters; her object has been to help in our quest, to this end she has given up much time and taken much trouble; and anything in the nature of suppression, either of suspicious circumstances or of hostile criticism, would be resented by her, just as it would be contrary to the whole spirit and traditions of the Society.

In these phenomena the first question is, whether the information given is so far in accordance with facts as to be worthy of consideration. Of this the reader can judge fairly from the records, so that no time need be spent in discussing it. But it is impossible to state fully—because no one knows, or can know—the exact circumstances under which the knowledge was obtained and given out by the medium. The value of the evidence, therefore, depends partly on the honesty of the medium and partly on the competence of the observers. The latter point may be judged of indirectly from the records, which show what precautions were taken, (*a*) to prevent information reaching the medium by normal means, (*b*) to distinguish information that could have reached her normally from that which apparently could not.

The honesty of the medium is a more difficult problem; because we must recognise the possibility that she might either consciously or unconsciously present knowledge obtained by ordinary means as if it were acquired supernormally, which is precisely what in these cases is meant by “deceit.” It is not customary in ordinary life to associate this word with any subconscious or unconscious condition, nor is it customary to analyse it or to do anything but simply anathematise it, and it may seem highly dangerous to be prepared to do anything else; yet on consideration it will be perceived that every piece of information given must be acquired somehow, and the whole interest of the phenomenon from our present point of view depends primarily on whether the information was acquired normally or not. The first question before us is whether the source of information can be shown to be supernormal; it is therefore necessary to assume that whenever the knowledge *could* have been acquired normally it was so acquired. Hence a discussion of normal means of obtaining information, and how far they may be presumed to go, becomes of the essence of the question.