

THROUGH THE LONG DAY.

CHAPTER I.

A ONCE NOTED CLAIRVOYANT.

IN the summer of 1844 the *Morning Chronicle* received an invitation from the celebrated Dr. Elliotson, to attend at his house in Conduit Street an exhibition of the wonderful powers attributed to a French youth named Alexis. The young man was asserted by his friends to be able to read in any page of any book, known or unknown to him, with his eyes bandaged, even if the book were held behind his head, or in an adjoining room; to see into the interior of any strong box, however securely locked or fastened, and to describe its contents, whatever they might be. Clairvoyance, then comparatively new as an imposture, had many believers; all impostures have for a time, however absurd or

outrageous they may be, among the unfortunately large and silly multitude, who love to be deceived and take a kind of insane pleasure in disbelieving the natural and true, in order that they may more thoroughly believe in the preternatural and the false. I was deputed by Mr. Black to attend the exhibition and report upon it without fear or favour.

I went accordingly, and was courteously received by Dr. Elliotson, with whom I was previously acquainted, and found from twenty to thirty ladies and gentlemen assembled in his drawing-room. Among the company was Colonel Gurwood, the editor of the *Duke of Wellington's Despatches*, to whom I was introduced by the Doctor. I was the only representative of the press present, for which I was afterwards sorry. Alexis was accompanied by a M. Marcillet, a French gentleman, whom I supposed at first to be his father, but who turned out to be the agent or speculator who had brought him over to England to make money by the display of his real or pretended powers. The performance began by M. Marcillet bandaging the eyes of Alexis, seated in a large arm-chair. The bandage was three, if not four-folded with silk handkerchiefs, so securely and artistically done that it was all but impossible that the slightest ray of light could reach the eyes. This done, M. Marcillet produced a large folio volume from Dr. Elliotson's library, and held it behind the head of Alexis at a distance

of three or four paces. The book was then opened, apparently at random, and Alexis was asked to read, either at the left hand or the right hand. He read a sentence accordingly, but very slowly and deliberately, and as if every word cost him an effort to decipher. M. Marcillet, Dr. Elliotson, Colonel Gurwood, and one or two others examined the page, and declared that the clairvoyant had read correctly, and without the mistake of a single word. I, however, was not satisfied. I did not even in my own mind accuse Dr. Elliotson or Colonel Gurwood of collusion, but I could not be certain that the book, the page, the very passage that had been read had not been made known to Alexis, either by M. Marcillet or some other agency, before the performance commenced, and that the whole affair was premeditated, prepared, and very cunningly devised, to deceive the credulous, the unthinking, the idle-minded, and the half-crazy lovers of the marvellous. I expressed my dissatisfaction with the experiment to Dr. Elliotson, who immediately suggested that it should be tried again, and that the volume should be opened at another page. But though the proposal might seem to be fair, there was no security to my mind against previous collusion, and that the next page, opened apparently at random, might not be as familiar as the first to the trained memory of Alexis. I replied that I would believe in the powers claimed for

Alexis if he would read on a piece of paper one word written by me, and known only to me, which I would fold up and enclose in an envelope, to be sealed in the presence of the company. I did not care, I said, whether, if his eyes were bandaged, the sealed envelope were placed in front of his face or behind his back.

This seemed to me to be a fair proposal, but was not considered to be so by the majority of those present. Dr. Elliotson himself, though willing that the experiment should be tried, expressed doubts of the result, because any openly expressed incredulity might, he said, have a disturbing effect on the magnetic and sympathetic current essential to be maintained in the mind of the clairvoyant! It was ultimately decided, though not without opposition by the believers in Alexis, that my little simple experiment should be tried. I retired alone into the adjoining room, and wrote one word, which I thought no Frenchman or Englishman would guess, if he exercised his imagination or his memory ever so industriously; and that word was "*Dingwall*." I proposed making a journey to that little remote town in the Highlands of Scotland during the ensuing week. If he read that word correctly, the castle of my incredulity would be stormed and captured, and Alexis for the future might number me among the staunchest believers in his extraordinary power of seeing without eyes; though at the same time I felt

assured that I should be able to convince any doubter, as hard of faith as I was, to absolve me from the charge or the suspicion of collusion.

The sealed envelope was held before the face of Alexis, and, after two or three minutes, behind his back, all the company looking on. After an interval, which was not, perhaps, very long, though it seemed to be so, Alexis declared that the word commenced with the letter F. I was requested to state whether this was right. I declined, on the ground that if he could see, he could see, and continue seeing, and that my assertion that he was right or my assertion that he was wrong could answer no good purpose. It was held by Colonel Gurwood that if he were right he needed encouragement, and that if he were wrong he needed a spur to try again. But I was obdurate in my refusal to give any hint whatever to the pretended clairvoyant. After another interval, he said that the second letter of the word was R. As the company were growing impatient, or if not impatient, weary, the experiment was brought to a close; the envelope was opened, and the written word was found to be *Dingwall*, in which there was neither an F nor a R. It appeared from M. Marcillet's explanation that Alexis had read the hidden word "*France*," the name of a place; and as "*Dingwall*" was also the name of a place, it was held by the believers and devotees that clairvoyance had

achieved a partial if not a complete triumph, and that Alexis, by his magnetic power, had been enabled to perceive that a place was indicated, and that in all probability, if more time had been given him, he would ultimately have succeeded in naming it correctly. Faith, it is declared on high authority, can remove mountains; and in this case it certainly removed a mountain of difficulty or absurdity.

The experiment, however, was not considered conclusive by Dr. Elliotson, and I was asked to renew my visit on a future day, when another opportunity should be given me to try it. In the meantime, and before the assemblage dispersed, a further attempt was made to try the strength and accuracy of the mental and abnormal vision of Alexis. Colonel Gurwood had brought with him a mahogany box of about a foot in height and of proportionate length, which he placed before the clairvoyant, and requested him to state what was in it. The Colonel had the key of it, and declared that he had not mentioned its contents to anyone in the room. Alexis, with his eyes still bandaged as before, was allowed to feel the box with his hands to make sure it was a box, and then sitting down in the arm-chair, with M. Marcillet on one side and Colonel Gurwood on the other, seemed to fix his whole attention on the task before him for five or six minutes, more or less, and then de-

clared that the box contained a bone ; that the bone was the tibia of an officer who served under the Duke of Wellington in the Peninsula ; that his leg had been amputated, and that the officer was still living and had a wife and family of several children. Colonel Gurwood declared the story to be true, unlocked the box, and produced the tibia. A little, thin, weazened old gentleman who sat beside me, and who was apparently a friend of Colonel Gurwood, turned to me, and said emphatically, " That is a clencher ! " I did not feel inclined to enter into an argument with him ; but it was no " clencher " to me, inasmuch as to have made it a " clencher " it would have been necessary to convince me that Colonel Gurwood had not been indiscreet enough to have mentioned the contents of the box to some person in the room, and that the history of the former owner of the tibia had not in some indirect manner reached the ears of M. Marcillet or other person pecuniarily interested in the success of Alexis, and had thence been allowed to percolate into the mind of Alexis himself. So I continued incredulous, though at least nine-tenths of the witnesses present remained firmer in the faith of clairvoyance than they had been before, if such a result were possible.

On the day appointed by Dr. Elliotson for the second trial of the experiment with the " one word," and the one word only, I attended at his

house, accompanied by my friend Patric Park, the sculptor. Though I had previously published in the *Morning Chronicle* a plain unvarnished account of the results of the first seance, I was not prepared for the repulse I received from the Doctor in again presenting myself at his house. On arrival Mr. Park and myself were shown up to the drawing-room, where a few ladies and a number of gentlemen were present. We were hardly seated when Dr. Elliotson came towards us, and objected to the presence of Mr. Park, who had come uninvited. Mr. Park offered immediately to withdraw, and I, on my part, if I had done wrong in bringing him as a witness of the experiment I proposed, offered to withdraw with him. Dr. Elliotson expressed his wonder that, after the opinions I had expressed in the *Morning Chronicle*, I should have come at all, and bowed us out of the apartment.

I published an account of this also in the *Morning Chronicle*, and so ended my connection with the affair of Alexis. I never heard any more of him or his patron Marcillet, except to learn, some weeks afterwards, that they had both quitted London.

Two or three years afterwards, being on a visit to Manchester, on the occasion of a grand soirée given by the directors of the Athenæum in that city, I attended a kindred display at the house of a physician who believed in the occult mysteries of

magnetism, clairvoyance, and thought-reading. The patient on whom the experiment was tried was no less celebrated a personage than Lord Morpeth, afterwards Earl of Carlisle, and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. The experiment was strictly private, the only persons present, besides Lord Morpeth and the physician, being myself and Dr. W. B. Hodgson, afterwards Professor of Political Economy in the University of Edinburgh. His lordship was put to sleep in an arm-chair by a few magnetic or mesmeric passes from the physician. Though his eyes were shut, he was not apparently wholly unconscious, but answered the questions put to him by the operator. We were told by the mesmerist, that by the strong mental and unexpressed exercise of his will, he could cause Lord Morpeth, or any other parties whom he might put into a mesmeric or magnetic trance, to think with his thoughts, whatever they might be, or however often he might vary. Taking from his vest-pocket a small gold pencil-case, and holding it to Lord Morpeth's nose, he asked him what it smelt of? Lord Morpeth replied without hesitation, "Of roses." The operator turning to us, said, "He is right, I thought of roses." Again placing the pencil-case to the patient's nose, he asked what it smelt of now? Lord Morpeth replied, "Of eau de cologne." "Right again," said the Doctor, "I thought of eau de cologne." The experiment, on being tried

for the third time, produced on his lordship's face an expression of disgust, and the reply, "Gas," while the Doctor as before replied, "Right! I thought of gas." Several other experiments were tried, all of them having reference to the sense of smell, and all yielding replies corresponding with those already cited.

The results were inexplicable to me at the time. They are inexplicable now. I report them exactly as they occurred. I cannot believe that Lord Morpeth was playing a part to mystify Dr. Hodgson and myself, nor can I believe that the highly respectable medical practitioner was in collusion with his lordship to play a trick upon me, or that he thought otherwise than he said he thought, in the matter of the various odours which he mentally attributed to a non-odorous substance. I leave the riddle as I find it, and pass on my way, unconvinced but not bewildered.
