

The Golden Era
February 11, 1866

Mark Twain a Committee Man

I attended the seance last night. After the house was crowded with ladies and gentlemen, Mrs. Foye stepped out upon the stage and said it was usual to elect a committee of two gentlemen to sit up there and see that everything was conducted with perfect honesty and fairness. She said she wished the audience to name gentlemen whose integrity, whose conscientiousness—in a word whose high moral character, in every respect, was notorious in the community. The majority of the audience arose with one impulse and called my name. This handsome compliment was as grateful as it was graceful, and I felt the tears spring to my eyes. I trust I shall never do anything to forfeit the generous confidence San Francisco has thus shown in me. This touching compliment is none the less grateful to me when I reflect that it took me two days to get it up. I “put up” that hand myself. I got all my friends to promise to go there and vote for me to be on that committee—and having reported a good deal in Legislatures, I knew how to do it right. I had a two-thirds vote secured—I wanted enough to elect me over the medium’s veto, you know. I was elected, and I was glad of it. I thought I would feel a good deal better satisfied if I could have a chance to examine into this mystery myself, without being obliged to take somebody else’s word for its fairness, and I did not go on that stand to find fault or make fun of the affair—a thing which would not speak well for my modesty when I reflect that so many men so much older and wiser than I am see nothing in Spiritualism to scoff at, but firmly believe in it as a religion.

Mr. Whiting was chosen as the other committee man, and we sat down at a little table on the stage with the medium, and proceeded to business. We wrote the names of various departed persons. Mr. W. wrote a good many, but I found that I did not know many dead people; however, I put in the names of two or three whom I had known well, and then filled out the list with names of citizens of San Francisco who had been distinguished in life, so that most persons in the audience could tell whether facts stated by such spirits concerning themselves were correct or not. I will remark here that not a solitary spirit summoned by me paid the least attention to the invitation. I never got a word out of any of them. One of Mr. Whiting’s spirits came up and stated some things about itself which were correct. Then some five hundred closely folded slips of paper containing names, were dumped in a pile on the table, and the lady began to lay them aside one by one. Finally a rap was heard. I took the folded paper; the spirit, so-called, seized the lady’s hand and wrote “J. M. Cooke” backwards and upside down on a sheet of paper. I opened the slip I held, and, as Captain Cuttle would say, “J. M. Cooke” was the “dientical” name in it. A gentleman in the audience said he sent up the name. He asked a question or so, and then the spirit wrote “Would like to communicate with you alone.” The privacy of this ghost was respected, and he was permitted to go to thunder again unmolested. “William Nelson” reported himself from the other world, and in answer to questions asked by a former friend of his in the audience, said he was aged 24 when he died; died by violence; died in a battle; was a soldier; had fought

both in the infantry and cavalry; fell at Chickamauga; had been a Catholic on earth—was not one now. Then in answer to a pelting volley of questions, the shadowy warrior wrote: “I don’t want to answer any more about it.” Exit Nelson.

About this time it was suggested that a couple of Germans be added to the committee, and it was done. Mr. Wallenstein, an elderly man, came forward, and also Mr. Ollendorf, a spry young fellow, cocked and primed for a sensation. They wrote some names. Then young Ollendorf said something which sounded like:

“Ist ein geist hierans?” (bursts of laughter from the audience).

Three raps—signifying that there was a geist hierans.

“Vollensie schriehen?” (more laughter). Three raps.

“Einzig stollen, linsowfitterowlickter-hairowfiterfrowleineruback folderol?” (Oh, this is too rough, you know. I can’t keep the run of this sort of thing.) Incredible as it may seem, the spirit cheerfully answered yes to that astonishing proposition.

Young Ollendorf sprang to his feet in a state of consuming excitement. He exclaimed:

“Laties and shentlemen! I write de name for a man vot lifs! Speerit rabbing dells me he ties in yahr eighteen hoondert und dwelf, but he yoos as live und helty as—”

The Medium—“Sit down, sir!”

Mr. O.—“But de speerit cheat! –dere is no such speerit—” (All this time applause and laughter by turns from the audience.)

Medium—“Take your seat, sir, and I will explain this matter.”

And she explained. And in that explanation she let off a blast which was so terrific that I half expected to see young Ollendorf shoot up through the roof. She said he had come up there with fraud and deceit and cheating in his heart, and a kindred spirit had come from the land of shadows to commune with him! She was terribly bitter. She said in substance, though not in words, that perdition was full of just such fellows as Ollendorf, and they were ready on the slightest pretext to rush in and assume any body’s name, and rap, and write, and lie, and swindle with a perfect looseness whenever they could rope in a living affinity like poor Ollendorf to communicate with! (Great applause and laughter.)

Ollendorf stood his ground with good pluck, and was going to open his batteries again, when a storm of cries arose all over the house. “Get down! Go on! Speak on—we’ll hear you! Climb down from that platform! Stay where you are—Vamose! Stick to your post—say your say! “

The medium rose up and said if Ollendorf remained, she would not. She recognized no one’s right to come there and insult her by practicing a deception upon her and attempting to bring ridicule upon so solemn a thing as her religious belief.

The audience then became quiet, and the subjugated Ollendorf retired from the platform.

The other German raised a spirit, questioned it at some length in his own language, and said the answers were correct. The medium claims to be entirely unacquainted with the German language.

A spirit seized the medium’s hand and wrote “G. L. Smith” very distinctly. She hunted through the mass of papers, and finally the spirit rapped. She handed me the folded paper she had just picked up. It had “T. J. Smith” in it. (You never can depend on these Smiths; you call for one and the whole tribe will come clattering out of hell to answer you.) Upon further inquiry it was discovered that both these Smiths were present. We chose “T. J.” A gentleman in the audience said that was his Smith. So he questioned him, and Smith said he died by violence; he had been a teacher; not a school-teacher, but (after some hesitation) a teacher of religion, and was a sort of a

cross between a Universalist and a Unitarian; has got straightened out and changed his opinion since he left here; said he was perfectly happy. Mr. George Purnell, having been added to the committee, proceeded in connection with myself, Mrs. Foye and a number of persons in the audience to question this talkative and frolicsome old parson. Among spirits, I judge he is the gayest of the gay. He said he had no tangible body; a bullet could pass through him and never make a hole; rain could pass through him as through vapor, and not discommode him in the least (wherefore I suppose he don't know enough to come in when it rains—or don't care enough); says heaven and hell are simply mental conditions—spirits in the former have happy and contented minds; and those in the latter are torn by remorse of conscience; says as far as he is concerned, he is all right—he is happy; would not say whether he was a very good or a very bad man on earth (the shrewd old water-proof nonentity! —I asked the question so that I might average my own chances for his luck in the other world, but he saw my drift); says he has an occupation there—puts in his time teaching and being taught; says there are spheres—grades of perfection—he is making pretty good progress—has been promoted a sphere or so since his matriculation (I said mentally: “Go slow, old man, go slow—you have got all eternity before you”—and he replied not); he don't know how many spheres there are (but I suppose there must be millions, because if a man goes galloping through them at the rate this old Universalist is doing, he will get through an infinitude of them by the time he has been there as long as old Sesostrius and those ancient mummies; and there is no estimating how high he will get in even the infancy of eternity—I am afraid the old man is scouring along rather too fast for the style of his surroundings, and the length of time he has got on his hands); says spirits cannot feel heat or cold (which militates somewhat against all my notions of orthodox damnation—fire and brimstone); says spirits commune with each other by thought—they have no language; says the distinctions of the sex are preserved there—and so forth and so on.

The old parson wrote and talked for an hour, and showed by his quick, shrewd, intelligent replies that he had not been sitting up nights in the other world for nothing, he had been prying into everything worth knowing, and finding out everything he possibly could—as he said himself, when he did not understand a thing he hunted up a spirit who could explain it; consequently he is pretty thoroughly posted; and for his accommodating conduct and its uniform courtesy to me, I sincerely hope he will continue to progress at his present velocity until he lands on the very roof of the highest sphere of all, and thus achieves perfection.

I have made a report of those proceedings which every person present will say is correct in every particular. But I do not know any more about the queer mystery than I did before. I could not even tell where the knocks were made, though they were not two feet from me. Sometimes they seemed to be on the corner of the table, sometimes under the center of it, and sometimes they seemed to proceed from the medium's knee joints. I could not locate them at all, though; they only had a general seeming of being in any one spot; sometimes they even seemed to be in the air. As to where that remarkable intelligence emanates from which directs those strangely accurate replies, that is beyond my reason. I cannot any more account for that than I could explain those wonderful miracles performed by Hindoo jugglers. I cannot tell whether the power is supernatural in either case or not, and I never expect to know as long as I live. It is necessarily impossible to know—and it is mighty hard to fully believe what you don't know.

But I am going to see it through, now, if I do not go crazy—an eccentricity that seems singularly apt to follow investigations of spiritualism.

(Source: Twainquotes.com, <http://www.twainquotes.com/18660200dt>.)