MAB., 1913. *Psychical* versus *Physical Theory of Dowsing.* 43

THE PSYCHICAL *VERSUS* THE PHYSICAL
THEOKY OF DOWSING.

BY Sm W. F. BARRETT, F.RS.

THE following interesting letter addressed to me by Professor Hoernlé, M.A., who holds the Chair of Philosophy in the Armstrong College, confirms the theoretical conclusions to which I was led in my investigation of the nature of the dowsing faculty. As will be seen by reference to the *Proc. S.P.E.* (Vol. XV., p. 314 (7) and also Appendix κ, ρ. 359), I attribute the success of a good dowser to his possessing a subconscious supernormal perceptive power. Usually the clairvoyant faculty of the dowser—if such it be, as I maintain—does not rise to the level of *conscious* perception, but evokes an obscure emotion, or other nervous disturbance, which reveals itself in a transitory *malaise,* or muscular spasm, and the latter causes the twisting of the forked rod. In some cases, however, there *is* a conscious perception of the underground water, or other hidden object of which the dowser is in search. This apparently occurs in the case of the young Dutch boy referred to in Professor Hoernlé's letter.

ARMSTRONG COLLEGE,
NEWCASTLE-ON-TYNE, *Dec.* 22, 1912.

As an Associate of the S.P.R,. and a reader of your Report on the use of the Divining Rod in the *Proceedings* of the Society, may I submit to you a remarkable case of water-finding by what appears to be clairvoyance, which was brought to my notice in South Africa?

In October, 1911, about 2| months before I left S. Africa (Cape Town) for good, I received a letter (in Dutch) from a resident at Paarl, a small country town about 60 miles from Cape Town, in which he told me of a boy, aged about 11 (I think) who could find water by "seeing" it. On my taking the letter to Mr. P. J. du Toit, Professor of Dutch at the South African College, Cape Town, I learnt that the case was well known to the Professor, because the boy in question lives in the Orange Free State on a farm close to one belonging to Prof, du Toit's brother.

I summarise the facts as told me by Prof, du Toit. When the boy was about 5 years of age, his father, finding the three wells on his farm inadequate, started digging for another without success. The boy came running to his mother : " Why does father dig there ?

44 *Journal of Society for Psychical Research.* MAR., 1913.

There is no water there. He ought to dig *here.* There is water here," and he pointed to a spot some yards away from where the father was digging. At first no one paid attention, taking it for childish prattle. But the boy insisted, and his curiously positive conviction finally impressed the parents so much, that they dug at the spot indicated, where, in due course, they struck a plentiful supply. At first they were upset, believing it—as " backveld " Boers are quite likely to do—a case of diabolical possession, but the minister of the Dutch Reformed Church had the good sense to reassure them. The story presently came to be bruited about the countryside; other farmers, either from curiosity or because themselves in need of fresh wells, asked the boy to visit their farms and indicate water. As a result, the parents soon lost their superstitious terror, and in fact ended by making a business of their son's " gift,"—by now, no doubt, regarded as " divine." At any rate, I was told that the fee—payable to the father—is *£5* for three indications ; money returned in case of failure. Many farmers, according to my informant, and also villages have successfully availed themselves of the boy's services. Of failures I could hear nothing—only of an alleged failure. When that was reported to the boy he insisted that they must have dug at the wrong spot, and revisiting the locality, he is said to have indicated as the original spot a spot about one yard away from the one where the people had dug, and at this original spot water was duly found.

The boy employs no rod or any other instrument or device. He is said to "see" the water simply as if there were no solid soil between him and it at all. He will point to the slope of a " kopje " and trace the line of a subterranean water-course, as if it were on the surface. And he speaks of seeing the water "gleam" and sparkle as if it were in the sunlight. He estimates the volume at least sufficiently to advise his employers whether it is worth their while to dig or not. I could not get certain evidence as to whether he can tell accurately how deep down they have to dig before they strike water. Also, I could not ascertain whether he is in a trance or in any other way in an abnormal condition when " seeing " water. But he was described as, apart from the gift, a perfectly normal and healthy child. Needless to say, he has no geological knowledge of any kind.

E. F. ALFRED HOERNLÉ.

As Professor Hoernlé asks for a similar case, I will quote
the following sent to me some time ago by the late **Dr;**

MAR., 1913. *Psychical* versus *Physical Theory of Dowsing.* 45

Hodgson from America. I had previously seen reports of this case in the American newspapers and had asked Dr. Hodgson if he could obtain further particulars for me.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

AUSTIN, TEXAS, *Feb.* 8, 1901.
DE. RICHARD HODGSON.

DEAR SIR,—In reference to the published newspaper account of the wonderful and unexplained gift of Guy Fenley, who can see water at any distance under the earth's surface, I have to say that my experiments have convinced me that he possesses this power *of* sight. I know that he can see through any substance and locate water beneath; also that he has located a number of good water supplies in localities in West Texas where water is almost an unknown luxury. There are many responsible people of Uvalde, Texas, and other places in that section of the State who have seen this wonderful sight displayed, and know that there is nothing mythical about it. I shall be glad to give you any detailed information concerning this boy and his wonderful gift, if you will inform me definitely as to what you desire on the subject.

Yours truly,

JOHN N. GARNER

(Member of House of Representatives).

I was unable to obtain any further information about this •case beyond the reports in the local newspapers. Other cases of the dowser apparently *seeing* underground water are to be found in the history of the so-called divining rod. Some of these are quoted in my Reports, see especially *Proc. S.P.R.,* Vol. XV., p. 363 *et seq.* In Appendix Ε to that Report, some successful experiments are recorded wherein the clairvoyance of the dowser, Mr. J. F. Young, was specially tested. Further, as shown in Appendix F, the ancient Zahoris were persons who apparently had this gift of clairvoyance.

Count Carl von Klinckowstroem of Munich, who has had some previous correspondence with me, has a paper on the " Divining Rod in Germany " in the December number of the *Journal.* Judging from information I received as to the interest excited in various quarters in France, Germany, and Scandinavia, after the publication of my Reports, in 1897 and 1900, the Count is, I think, mistaken in supposing that " the attention of all Germany" was first drawn to the dowsing rod in 1902

46 *Journal of Society for Psychical Research* MAE., 1913.

by the publication of an article in a German weekly journal called *Prometheus.* However that may be, there is no doubt considerable public interest was excited in Germany when Herr G. Franzius employed Herr v. Biilow-Bothkamp to locate the site for a well in Kiel Dockyard. From the contemporary report of the proceedings which I have seen, the experiments then made hardly appear to justify Herr Franzius becoming,, as Count v. Klinckowstroem says he is, " an enthusiastic adherent of the dowsing rod." But from whatever cause his conviction arose, it is certainly very gratifying to find men in the high position of Herr G. Franzius and others in Germany taking so deep an interest in this subject. Our hearty thanks are due to Count Carl v. Klinckowstroem for his successful efforts in forming a society in Munich for the investigation of dowsing; a society which, he tells us, now numbers over 350 members of all nationalities.

I am also very glad to hear what the Count says, " that we in Germany have considerably advanced the problem of the dowsing rod during the last few years," and it is to be hoped he will embody the results in a paper for our *Proceedings\** In the explanation of the subject I venture to differ entirely from the view expressed by the Count, who remarks : " We do not believe that the . . . solution of the problem lies in a supernormal psychical gift of the dowser, but in the physical influence of the soil acting on him." I can find no evidence of any value to support this view. On the contrary, the evidence points to the fact that neither soil, nor water, nor metals, etc., etc., have any specific physical influence on the dowser. Some stoutly maintain that electricity, and some that radio-activity, is the true explanation ; but these and other physical causes are found to be inoperative when proper precautions are taken to avoid the influence of suggestion, and the dowser is a very " suggestible " person. Moreover, at different periods and in different places the dowser has been employed to discover all sorts of objects, from buried treasure to mineral oil springs.

There is abundant trustworthy evidence, some of which I have cited in my reports, and others subsequently in the *Journal,* to show that coins, and hidden objects of various kinds, can be located by a good dowser, far more often than

MAE., 1913. *Psychical* versus *Physical Theory of Dowsing.* 47

chance coincidence will account for. I would ask Count v. Klinckowstroem how he would explain by a "physical influence of the soil " acting upon the dowser the experiments recorded in my paper "On the detection of hidden objects by Dowsers" published in the *Journal,* S.P.K., for Jan. 1910, Vol. XIV., p. 183 *et seq.*

Here I may cite an interesting case from an amateur lady dowser, a friend of mine, Miss F. M. Turner, who writes to me as follows :

HOPTON COURT,
near WORCESTER, *April* 11, 1911.

A little while ago a valuable turquoise and diamond ring was lost, on a hockey ground, by the daughter of the Vicar of Pershore, in Worcestershire. The ring had been given her to take care of while her friend was playing hockey, and the loser was naturally greatly distressed. Long and repeated search was immediately made for the missing ring, but it was without result, and all hope of ever seeing the ring again was abandoned. The loser one day chanced to hear of my " divining " powers, and at once wrote to me, and I consented to go and see if I could help in such a minute search. The day was a very stormy one, and I had only time to carefully walk backward and forward by the pavilion and mark one place where my rod turned in my hand, when a very heavy storm of hail and rain came on, and when it was over the ground was so wet and muddy we could not properly examine the spot I had marked—also, I had to catch my train. Next day the lady and her sister went back to the place with a garden fork, and the very first sod they moved contained the ring ; it had been trodden into the ground half an inch, and was only three inches away from the spot marked by me the day before. ... I must confess that I was as surprised as-everyone else that such a small thing as a ring could be found by the rod in such a large tract of ground as the hockey field.

FLORENCE M. TURNER.

I asked Miss Turner to obtain corroborative evidence, and she forwarded to me the accompanying letter from the loser of the ring. The letter, it will be seen, was written to Miss Turner before her letter to me, and immediately after the discovery of the ring.

THE VICARAGE, PERSHORE, *March nth,* 1911.
DEAR Miss TURNER,—It seems almost too good to be true, but
the ring is found. My sister and I have just been down to the

48 *Journal of Society for Psychical Research.* MAB., 1913.

field and went straight to the place where you said there was something. I gave the fork to my sister, while I felt some of the turf we had already turned up with my fingers, and the first sod she turned up contained the ring ! It was about half an inch from the surface, and only three inches away from where you had stood. I can't tell you how delighted I am nor how very grateful I am to you for being the means of my finding it. I am certain that but for you it would never have been found, and I should always have had this weight on my mind ; now I feel so much lighter without it. I wish there were anything I could do to show you my gratitude. I can't express it in words. I am so glad to have the actual stick which you found it with, and I shall always keep it, as it did so much for me.

Believe me,

Yours sincerely,

MARY LAWSON.

If chance coincidence be the explanation of such a case as the foregoing much would depend upon the area of the ground over which the loser of the ring had walked before the loss was discovered. Possibly it was not more than a few square yards, but, even so, prolonged search at the time under favourable circumstances failed to discover the ring, whereas after some time had elapsed and the ring had been trodden into the ground, and under most unfavourable conditions of weather, Miss Turner located the exact position of the ring, although she was a stranger and had not been present when the ring-was lost.

This incident, if it stood alone, might nevertheless be attributed to a lucky hit, but, taken in conjunction with the other evidence cited in the paper I have referred to in the *Journal,* it adds another stick to the large bundle of evidence on behalf of the reality, and also of the psychical theory, of dowsing.