



The Unhappy Medium: Spiritualism and the Life of Margaret Fox

Earl Wesley Fornell

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“Here, Mr. Split-Foot, do as I do!” exclaimed the child, and the spirits obeyed her command. Thus, in 1848, thirteen-year-old Margaret Fox inaugurated the age of spiritualism. Those early spirit manifestations in a humble New York farmhouse were “but the beginning of a grand seance which for the next half century was to see persons returned from the dead walking upon the earth, mingling freely with mortal Americans. Ceremonies were performed which united in wedlock the living and the dead; ghostly schoolboys returned from the land of the spirits to revisit their old schoolhouses, upsetting the dignity of earthly classrooms . . . Drivers of owl horsecars . . . were intrigued by beautiful female spirits who rode their cars at night and promptly vanished if approached for a fare.”

The colorful career of Margaret Fox, the most famous medium of the era and the “fountainhead” of the cult of spiritualism, attracted the attention of the most prominent public figures of the day. For P. T. Barnum, this phenomenon was another novelty to present to the American public. Horace Greeley took a personal interest in Margaret and her sister; he gave the movement extensive publicity. Lincoln often invited Margaret Fox and other mediums to the White House for seances, during which attempts were made to invoke the spirit of the Lincolns’ dead son. Members of Congress, judges, and intellectuals of the day were well acquainted with her and with the spiritualist movement.

The course of this spirit invasion and the many and varied means by which men communicated with dwellers of the other world are the subjects of this volume. With Margaret Fox the spirits spoke by rapping on floor and furniture. With others they communicated by writing on slates, by touching with ghostly hands, by moving furniture (one medium was so popular that his furniture followed him about like a pack of dogs). Some spirits spoke directly through the mouths of entranced mediums. And some were so bold—or so talented—that they were able to materialize in the flesh before properly receptive groups of people—and happy indeed was the devotee who received a warm embrace from a lovely young spirit lady or a handsome ghostly gentleman during such a materialization.

The spirits who thus displayed their interest in this mortal world soon came to have a considerable influence over whole segments of the American population. For some, spiritualism was a comforting means of maintaining contact with loved ones now departed. For others it was a religion, a blessed aid on the road to salvation. For still others it provided practical assistance with more earthly problems. Many found in it intriguing puzzles for scientific investigation. And for the whole country it provided a constant source of excitement, interest, and entertainment.

Written in spritely prose and permeated with a grave humor, this account of nineteenth-century spiritualism will be equally satisfying to the casual reader interested in a good story, and to the scholar seeking serious social history.



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