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Magnetism Among the Shakers

By C. M. Sedgwick

Editor's note: Catherine M. Sedgwick is well known in Shaker scholarship for her novel *Redwood*, in which the Shakers and Hancock Shaker village play a central role. The article reprinted below records a particularly personal account of a visit by a long-time Shaker to the home of an old friend. The Shaker brother had been a member of an unnamed Shaker village for forty years and had joined with his wife and two children. He describes how his daughter left the faith and married and how his wife soon joined the daughter in the World. The son then apostasized, leaving the father alone with the Shakers. The account describes visions from the Era of Manifestations and describes the man's uneasiness with this new development. It is surprising that it is unrecorded by Mary Richmond in *Shaker Literature*, as it was published in numerous periodicals; including: *Sartain's Union Magazine of Literature and Art* 4, no. 5 (May 1849): [337]-38 (from which this article is reprinted); *Gazette of the Union* 10, no. 19 (May 12, 1849): 305; *Littel's Living Age* 21, no. 261 (May 19, 1849): 334-35; *The Female Prose Writers of America* (Philadelphia: E. H. Butler & Co., 1857), 19-23; and under the title "Animal Magnetism Among the Shakers," *Christian Register* 28, no. 24 (June 16, 1849): 96, and *Gospel Banner*, Aug. 18, 1849.



One of the brethren from a Shaker settlement in our neighborhood, called on us the other day. I was staying with a friend, in whose atmosphere there is a moral power, analogous to some chemical test, which elicits from every form of humanity whatever of sweet and genial is in it. Our visitor was an old acquaintance, and an old member of his order, having joined it more than forty years ago with his wife and two children. I have known marked individuals among these people, and yet it surprises me when I see an original stamp of character, surviving the extinguishing monotony of life, or rather suspended animation among them. What God has impressed man cannot efface. To a child's eye, each leaf of a tree is like thee other; to a philosopher's each has its distinctive mark. Our friend W's individuality might have struck a careless observer. He has nothing of the angular, crusty, silent aspect of most of his yea and nay brethren, who have a perfect conviction that they have dived to the bottom of the well and found the pearl truth, while all the rest of the world look upon them as at the bottom of a well indeed; but without the pearl, and with only so much

light as may come in through the little aperture that communicates with the outward world. Neither are quite right; the Shaker has no monopoly of truth or holiness, but we believe he has enough of both to light a dusky path to heaven. Friend W—— is a man of no pretension whatever; but content in conscious mediocrity. We were at dinner when he came in; but friend W—— is too childlike or too simple, to be disturbed by any observances of conventional politeness. He declined an invitation to dine, saying he had eaten and was not hungry, and seated himself in the corner, after depositing some apples on the table, of rare size and beauty. “I have brought some notions, too,” he said, “for you, B——,” and he took from his ample pocket his handkerchief, in which he had tied up a parcel of sugar plums and peppermints. B—— accepted them most affably, and without any apparent recoiling, shifted them from the old man’s handkerchief to an empty plate beside her. “Half of them,” he said, “remember, B—— are for —— . You both played and sung to me last summer—I don’t forget it. She is a likely woman, and makes the music sound almost as good as when I was young!” This was enthusiasm in the old Shaker; but to us it sounded strangely, who knew that she who had so kindly condescended to call back brother W’s youth, had held crowds entranced by her genius. Brother W—— is a genial old man, and fifty years of abstinence from the world’s pleasures has not made him forget or condemn them. He resembles the jolly friars in conventual life, who never resist, and are therefore allowed to go without bits or reins, and in a very easy harness. There is no galling in restraint where there is no desire for freedom. It is the “immortal longings” that make the friction in life. After dinner, B——, at brother W’s request, sat down to the piano, and played for him the various tunes that were the favorites in rustic inland life forty years ago. First the Highland reel, then “Money Musk.” “I remember who I danced that with,” he said, “Sophy Drury. The ball was held in the school room at Feeding fields. She is tight built, and cheeks as red as a rose, (past and present were confounded in brother W’s imagination.) I went home with Sophy—it was as light as day, and near upon day—them was pleasant times!” concluded the old man, but without one sigh of regret, and with a gleam of light from his twinkling grey eye. “There have been no such pleasant times since, brother W——, has there?” asked B——, with assumed or real sympathy. “I can’t say that, B——, it has been all along pleasant. I have had what others call crosses, but I don’t look at them that way—what’s the use, B——?” The old man’s philosophy struck me. There was no record of a cross in his round

jolly face. “Were you married,” I asked, “when you joined the Shakers?” “Oh, yes; I married at twenty—it’s never too soon nor too late to do right, you know, and it was right for me to marry according to the light I had then. May be you think it was a cross to part from my wife—all men don’t take it so—but I own I should; I liked Eunice. She is a peaceable woman, and we lived in unity, but it was rather hard times, and we felt a call to join the brethren, and so we walked out of the world together, and took our two children with us. In the society she was the first woman handy in all cases. “And she is still with you?” “No. Our girl took a notion and went off, and got married, and my wife went after her—that’s natural for mothers, you know. I went after Eunice, and tried to persuade her to come back, and she felt so; but its hard rooting out mother-love; it’s planted deep, and spreads wide; so I left her to nature, and troubled myself no more about it, for what was the use? My son, too, took a liking to a young English girl that was one of our sisters—maybe you have seen her?” We had all seen her and admired her fresh English beauty, and deplored her fate.” Well, she was a picture, and speaking after the manner of men, as good as she was handsome. They went off together; I could not much blame them, and I took no steps after them—for what was the use? But come, B—— strike up again; play ‘Haste to the wedding.’ B—— obeyed, and our old friend sang or chanted a low accompaniment; in which the dancing tune, and the shaker nasal chant were ludicrously mingled. B—— played all his favorite airs, and then said, “You do love dancing, brother W——?” “Yes, to be sure—‘praise him in the cymbals and dances!’”

“Oh, but I mean such dances as we have here. Would not you like, brother W——. to come over and see us dance?”

“Why, may be I should.”

“And would not you like to dance with one of our pretty young ladies, brother W——?”

“Maybe I should;” the old man’s face lit up joyously—but he smiled and shook his head, “they would not let me, B——, they would not let me.” Perhaps the old shaker’s imagination wandered for a moment from the very straight path of the brotherhood, but it was but a moment. His face reverted to its placid passiveness, and he said, “I am perfectly content. I have enough to eat and drink—every thing good after its kind, too—good clothes to wear, a warm bed to sleep in, and just as much work as I like, and no more.” “All this and heaven too,” —of which the old man felt perfectly sure, was quite enough to fill the measure of a Shaker’s desires.

“Now, B——,” said he, “you think so much of your dances, I wish you could see one of our young sisters dance, when we go up to Mount Holy. She has the whirling gift; she will spin round like a top, on one foot, for half an hour, all the while seeing visions, and receiving revelations.”

This whirling is a recent gift of the Shakers. The few “world’s folk” who have been permitted to see its exhibition, compare its subjects to the whirling Dervishes.

“Have you any other new inspiration?” I asked. “Gifts, you mean? Oh, yes; we have *visionists*. It’s a wonderful mystery to me. I never was much for looking into mysteries—they rather scare me!” Naturally enough, poor childlike old man! “What, brother W——,” I asked, “do you mean by a visionist?”

“I can’t exactly explain,” he replied. “They see things that the natural eye can’t see, and hear, and touch, and taste, with inward senses. As for me, I never had any kind of gifts, but a contented mind, and submission to those in authority, and I don’t see at all into this new mystery. It makes me of a tremble when I think of it. I’ll tell you how it acts. Last summer I was among our brethren in York State, and when I was coming away, I went down into the garden to take leave of a young brother there. He asked me if I would carry something for him to Vesta. Vesta is a young sister, famous for her spiritual gifts, whirling, &c.” —I could have added, for I had seen Vesta—for other less questionable gifts in the world’s estimation—a light graceful figure, graceful even in the shaker straight jacket, and a face like a young Sybil’s. “Well,” continued brother W——, “he put his hand in his pocket, as if to take out something, and then stretching it to me, he said, ‘I want you to give this white pear to Vesta.,’ I felt to take something, though I saw nothing, and a sort of a trickling heat ran through me; and even now, when I think of it, I have the same feeling, fainter, but the same. When I got home I asked Vesta if she knew that young brother. ‘Yea,’ she said. I put my hand in my pocket and took it out again, to all earthly seeming as empty as it went in, and stretched it out to her. ‘Oh, a white pear!’ she said. As I hope for salvation, every word that I tell you is true,” concluded the old man. It was evident he believed every word of it to be true. The incredulous may imagine that there was some clandestine intercourse between the “young brother” and “young sister,” and that simple old brother Wilcox was merely made the medium of a fact or sentiment, symbolised by the white pear. However that may be, it is certain that animal magnetism has penetrated into the cold and dark recesses of the Shakers.