
THE TABLES TURNED

A BSHS STROLLING PLAYERS PRODUCTION

James Wendall – Tom Lean

Arthur Brookes – Geoff Belknap

Robert Middleton – Julia Hyland

Arabella Cloud – Sabine Clarke

The President – Melanie Keene

~: The Scene :~

A meeting of the Guildford Literary and Scientific Society on September 9th 1860. The audience assembled are local men and women who are most interested in the latest advancements in the arts and sciences. This evening the Society will discuss a topic that has been in the print news for several years and provoked much public debate; namely the mysterious phenomena of Table Turning or Table Tipping.

This evening, two distinguished scientists from the Royal Society will present their views on this phenomenon. One of these scientists is famous in the press for his suggestion that table turning is genuine. The other recently attended a séance and left with his sceptical views firmly intact.

Also speaking at the meeting are two other attendees of the same séance: a female poet and a journalist from The Times who has made a good living reporting on these phenomena over the past year.

They are all seated in a cosy way on a table.

~: The Script :~

Introduction by the President of the Guildford Literary and Scientific Society.

President: Good evening and welcome to this meeting of the Guildford Literary and Scientific Society. This evening we are most honoured to have a number of eminent

speakers present who have come to discuss the subject of spiritual phenomena. First I would like to introduce Mr Robert Middleton. Mr Middleton is a journalist who has written a great deal about the current enthusiasm amongst the public for attending séances. Recently Mr Middleton played host to a séance that was attended by Mr James Wendall who is well known for his scientific investigations in magnetism. Also present is the poet Miss Arabella Cloud. They are here today to give you their views on the truth of such things as table turning and spirit rapping. I would also like to introduce Mr Brookes, a Canadian scientist who has spent the last year studying the strange phenomena of the séance room.

So Mr Wendall, may I ask you first why did you agree to the offer by Mr Middleton to attend the séance at his home and meet the medium Miss Lizzy Lightman?

Wendall: Madam President - I have received numerous letters from members of the public urging me to witness for myself the events of the séance room. In these letters apparently rational people recount how they have been persuaded of the truth of phenomena such as *table turning* and *spirit rapping* by the *evidence of their own eyes and ears*. In these letters they ask whether in my opinion this is proof of spirits from the afterlife communicating with the living.

President: And what do you reply?

Wendall (chuckling slightly): The short answer to this question is “no”. But I felt that as a scientist I had some duty to investigate any moving objects or unexpected noises for myself. So in August I attended a séance organised by my friend Mr Middleton.

President: Could you relate for the benefit of the society your findings?

Wendall: Certainly. At this séance I recorded my careful *observations* of the room, the demeanour of the medium and the guests. When sitting around the table the medium instructed us to hold our hands together whilst she [*Sarcastically*] called upon the spirits.

A number of knocks were heard and the medium told me this was the spirits communicating. I noticed the knocks came from one part of the room in particular so I requested the spirits move to a different locality – they did not comply.

Middleton (nodding and chuckling): No they did not. They were most unco-operative!

Brookes frowns at the mocking tone.

President: Apart from ‘spirit-rapping’, did you witness anything else Mr Wendall?

Wendall: Later there was a large and sudden movement of the table. The movement was real but I noticed that there were several pairs of arms on the table and several pairs of legs under. I did not say what I thought might really be happening. However, my request to sit beneath the table was declined. [*Gesturing excitedly*] I did at one point grasp the table firmly between my knees and waited for the pull. When it came my knee resisted it and I prevailed against the spirit – an interesting fact known only to the particular spirit and myself.

President: I take it Mr Wendall, that you were not convinced of the truth of spiritual communication?

Wendall: I found no *evidence* of supernatural spirits present in the room that evening. In addition I am not at all convinced that some new and previously unknown *vital* or *motor force* accounts for any rapping or table turning effects.

Brookes [good natured if patronising]: With all respect Mr Wendall, but that statement is mere opinion on your part! You have placed no *evidence* before us today to *disprove* the reality of these phenomena.

Wendall [a little surprised at such impertinence]: [Emphatically] Look here – a scientist considering a question must set out beforehand with a clear idea of the naturally possible and impossible. We know, from scientific theory, that some things are not possible - the world is governed by *physical* laws. Phenomena that cannot be explained by the laws of science, cannot really exist.

Cloud: Oh what terrible arrogance!

President: Are you suggesting that this medium, Lizzy Lightman, is a fraud?

Wendall: Maybe. She may merely be deluded. She claimed at one point that the phenomena over which she presides – table turning and what not, are no more fantastic than the magnetic forces I study in my laboratory. This is patent nonsense.

President: Thank you Mr Wendall. I now have the honour to ask Mr Brookes, another august scientific man and corresponding member of the Royal Society, to address us. He has also conducted investigations into these so-called spiritual phenomena.

Brookes: I am most very flattered to be asked to come and speak before you today. I wish to relate my findings of a year spent in the company of a medium.

Wendall [snorting]: A year well spent, I’m sure!

He receives a 'look' from the President.

Brookes: Mr Wendall has stated that the man of science must decide whether a thing is possible or impossible *before* examining any phenomena. I disagree. I feel it falls upon the scientific man to venture upon the enquiry with no preconceived notions whatsoever as to what can be or cannot be. I enter upon investigation with all my senses alert and with a mind free of preconceptions. Thus I embarked upon my own investigation of the séance room. I have concluded, after numerous investigations, that the movement of things such as tables and the production of sounds are fact.

Wendall [clearly outraged]: Fact! You claim to be a scientist and yet you vouch for the truth of things that have no scientific explanation!

Brookes: I have experienced them first hand and found no evidence of fraud. These phenomena are genuine in their occurrence.

If these things can be experienced then we cannot deny them - even if they are things that cannot be explained by any physical law *at present known*. A scientist must enter into such questions with an open mind. Your prejudice has clouded your senses. You will not accept these phenomena as you do not wish to.

Wendall: So what are you saying sir? That science must now accept that spirits are talking to us from beyond the grave? You really are too gullible! One can only imagine what passes for a scientific education in the colonies!

President: Now, now, let us ensure our conduct is gentlemanly, Mr Wendall. Mr Brookes – are you claiming that spirits cause table turning?

Brookes: I cannot, at present, hazard even the most vague hypothesis as to the cause of the phenomena. Hitherto I have seen nothing to convince me of the truth of the spiritual theory. In such an inquiry the intellect demands that there must be *positive* proof of spirits and this must be absolutely incapable of being explained away. These phenomena cannot be denied as they can be experienced. Science must now find an explanation for what it previously has ignored.

Wendell: Poppycock! No man is a scientist if he is so easily duped.

Middleton: Ladies and Gentleman a disagreement between eminent men of science is not the ideal situation when the public needs them tell us the *facts*.

President: It seems, Mr Brookes and Mr Wendell disagree as to the cause of such phenomena as strange table turning and mysterious knocking. Mr Wendell has implied such things are fraudulent or delusions of the ignorant. Mr Brookes suggests that since the senses of a scientist are not easily misled – these things are real. It should be noted by the audience that you both agree, however, that no spirits are involved. Mr Brookes seems to be suggesting that science will, eventually, furnish us with an explanation

Wendell snorts.

Cloud: I wish to address the audience.

President: Ladies and Gentlemen, many of you know Miss Cloud from her powerful poems and stories.

Cloud: I just wish to ask both scientific gentlemen why there are so intent on *disenchanted* the world. Surely they are not so arrogant to concede there are limits to their power to know everything – there are things that science does not know. Indeed there are things that science can never know. I myself have experienced extraordinary visions of things that a scientist would claim cannot be. The sight at dawn of a winged figure standing at the end of my bed. Once, when ill, the feeling of a cool hand on my brow when no-one was in the room. I too rely upon the evidence of my senses and my senses have showed me that there are wonderful and beautiful things beyond the reach of our current scientific principles.

Wendall: And these things are from the other side, the spirit world?

Cloud: On that question I think we should keep an *open mind*.

Wendall: (*turning to audience*) Ladies and Gentlemen, one thing I have discovered in my investigations is that *women* are particularly suggestible to the idea of spiritual phenomenon. And I have noticed that it is often women that are the bridge to the *supposed spirit-world*. You, as learned members of the *Literary and Scientific Society* will surely agree that the only people who can resolve our question are men who are *scientifically trained*.

Brookes: Yes Mr Wendall, but the scientific man is defined by his clear and open mind. You, it seems, are full of prejudice and cynicism. I fear that you have been exposed too long to the corrupting influences of London society. I hear that in the metropolis it is the fashion to sneer.

President [jumping in before the tone deteriorates again]: Gentlemen, ladies, we are short of time. Are there any more points you wish to make?

Middleton: Madam President, can I just say that I think the members of this society must consider carefully the implications of accepting the truth of spiritual communication. If we accept these phenomena as true and supernatural in origin is this not a backward step for our modern civilisation? When we react against science are we not rejecting progress? I am a great admirer of Miss Cloud's poetry but her suggestion that there may be strange and supernatural things beyond the reach of science seems to me not just silly but dangerous. If we accept this – what next? A return to beliefs in witchcraft and other forms of backwardness? It is of grave concern to me that so many members of the public should be so eager to have mediums make such fools out of them!

President: Thank you, thank you speakers. Now it is the time to let the members of our *Society* consult. I would like to ask our members to consider the points that have been made amongst themselves and to use 5 minutes of conversation to prepare some questions for our guests.

Discussion.

In response to questions from the audience:

Wendall: Science has established the main forces that govern the world and all it contains. There is no previously unrecognised force that science has failed to establish. A supernatural or spiritual force that ONLY occurs in the presence of a medium is not real because:

The physical laws of the universe require that a force be present universally – not just in a drawing room in the presence of a medium and not just recently when not previously apparent.

Any force should be measurable with scientific instruments. Thinks this is highly unlikely in the case of 'spirit forces'. He (Wendall) would dearly like to take Miss Lightman into his laboratory but she says this would scare the spirits. Forces which come and go like this seem likely not to be real. His magnetic forces on the other hand are reliable phenomena which can be observed by anyone and made to perform at any time and they are measurable phenomena.

An educated scientific man is able to investigate phenomena and by virtue of his scientific training his intellect can reason what is a genuine phenomenon and what is not. Seeing is not believing. From a distance St Pauls cathedral is measured as only inches tall. But reason tells us how to understand that evidence of our senses and know that this is not the case in actuality. The scientific training he has received means he has a fully clear but also sceptical mind.

Brookes: Whilst seeing is not necessarily believing we should keep an open mind until we have actual proof that the evidence is not as it seems. Mr Wendall has not provided actual proof that there was not forces at work in the séance room that night – only his supposition. The evidence of his (Brookes) senses is clear enough. An open mind must be kept until either the cause is found or absolute proof provided of fraud. Wendall is confusing truth determined by scientific method with the expression of his own opinions.

Many things that science now sees as fact were once upon a time seen as fantastic. Take the telegraph. Or Mr Wendall's magnetic forces. The key characteristic of a scientist is objectivity, not qualifications, and objectivity requires an open mind on any question until proof in either direction has been found.

President: Concerned that disagreement between the two scientists is not doing the cause of science much good in the eyes of the public. Fears for the public image of science and fears that this dispute will undermine faith in science and scientific medicine allowing all sorts of quacks and charlatans to gain authority with the public. It is the 'thin end of the wedge'.

Middleton: Should communicate to the audience just how popular spiritualism has become with the public. Hundreds of letters to the paper and plenty of articles about table turning etc. Thinks that it has become a bit of a craze and the public are probably just seeking entertainment – it is a very silly fashion. But by enthusiastically attending séances and allowing themselves to be entertained in this way there are :

1) Making fools of themselves and showing themselves to be less rational and more ignorant than they should be. It is a very said indictment upon the British education system that people would be such fools. Does not do the standing of Britain as a

nation any good whatsoever. Britain has an empire and has to maintain authority over millions of people – this authority is predicated on the superior nature of British civilisation.

2) Lining the pockets of fraudsters.

Cloud: Thinks that the hostile attitude of Mr Wendall and Mr Middleton is borne of arrogance and a need to impose their views on others. Why are they so scared that there may be forces at work that they had not previously known of? There are strange phenomena and special forces can only be divined by certain people. As a poet she understands that artists often experience the world in ways different to the common man – why do they deny this?