

The “ INDESCRIBABLE PHENOMENON.”

WHEN the bulk of the London Press elects to gush over anything or anybody, there are at all events, *prim& facie* grounds for believing that there is something to justify such a consensus. When, moreover, the object of such gush is a young lady claiming to be a spirit-medium, the unanimity is so unusual as certainly to make the matter worth the most careful inquiry, for hitherto the London Press has either denounced spiritualism altogether, or gushed singly over individual mediums, presumably according to the several proclivities ‘of the correspondents. Ok’

Miss Annie Eva Fay, however-is not the very name fairy-like and fascinating ?-I read in one usually sober-minded journal that “there is something not of this earth about the young lady’s powers.” Another averred that she was “ a spirit medium of remarkable and extraordinary power.” Others, more cautious, described the “ mystery” as “ bewildering,” the “ entertainment” as “ extraordinary and incomprehensible,” while yet another seemed to me to afford an index to the cause of this gush by saying that ” Miss Pay is a pretty young lady of about twenty, with a delicate spiritual face, and a profusion of light hair, frizzled on the forehead.”

I made a point of attending Miss Annie *Eva* Fay’s opening performance at the Hanover Square Rooms, and found all true enough as to the pretty face and the * friziled hair. Of the “ indescribable” nature of the “ phenomenon” (for by that title is Miss Fay announced, a la Vincent Crummies) there may be two opinions, according as we regard the young lady as a kind of Delphic Priestess and Cumaan Sibyl rolled into one, or simply a clever conjuror-conjuress, if there be such a word.

Let me, then, with that delightful inconsistency so often brought to bear on the so-called or self-styled “ supernatural,” first describe the “ indescribable,” and then, in the language of the un-spiritual Dr. Lynn, tell how it is all done; for, of course, I found it all out, like a great many others of the enlightened and select audience which gathered at Miss Annie Eva Fay’s first drawing-room reception in the Queen’s Concert Rooms.

Arriving at the door half an hour too early, as I had misread the time of commencement, I found at the portal Mr. Burns, of the Progressive Library, and a gentleman with a diamond brooch in his shirt-front, whom I guessed at once, from that adornment, to be the proprietor of the

indescribable phenomenon, and I was, in fact, immediately introduced to him as Colonel Fay.

Passing in due course within the cavernous room which might have suited well a Cumman Sibyl on a small scale, I 'found the platform occupied by a tiny cabinet, unlike that of the Davenports in that it was open in front, with a green curtain, which I could see was destined to be let down during –the performance of the phenomenal manifestations. There was a camp-stool inside the cabinet; a number of cane-bottomed chairs on the platform, and also the various properties of a spirit séance, familiar to me from long experience, guitar, fiddle, hand bells, tambourine, &c. One adjunct alone was new; and that was a green stable bucket, destined, I could not doubt, to figure in what my Rimmel scented programme promised as the climax of Part I.-the "Great Pail Sensation." Presently Colonel Fay, in a brief speech, nasal but fluent, introduced the subject, and asked two gentlemen to act as a Committee of Inspection. Two stepped forward immediately indeed too immediately, as the result proved ; one a "citizen of this city," as Colonel Fay had requested; but the other a Hindu young gentleman, who, I believe, lost the confidence of the audience at once from his foreign face and Oriental garb. However, they were first to the front, and so were elected, and proceeded at once to "examine" the cabinet in that obviously helpless and imperfect way common to novices who work with the gaze of -an audience upon them. Then, from a side door, stage left, enter the Indescribable Phenomenon. A pretty young lady, yes, and with light frizzled hair to any extent. There was perhaps "a spirit look within her eyes ;" but then I have often found this to be the case with young ladies of twenty. Her dress of light silk was beyond reproach. I had seen Florence Cook and Miss Showers lately ; and,-well, I thought those two, with the assistance of Miss Annie Eva Fay, would have made a very pretty model for a statuette of the Three Graces.

Miss Fay, after being described by the Colonel vaguely enough as "of the United States," was bound on both wrists with strips of calico ; the knots were sewn by the European gentleman-as distinguished from the Asiatic youth. He was not quite au fait at the needle, but got through it in time. Miss Fay was then placed on the camp-stool, her wrists fastened behind her, and her neck also secured to a ring screwed into the back of the cabinet. A rope was tied round her ankles, and passed right to the front of the stage, where the Hindoo youth was located and bidden hold it taut, which he did conscientiously, his attitude being what Colman describes "like some fat gentleman who bobbed for eels."

First of all, another strip of ca1ic.o was placed loosely round Miss Fay's neck; the curtain descended. Hey, presto! it was up again, sooner than it takes to write, and this strip was knotted doubly and trebly round her neck. A tambourine hoop was put in her lap, and this, in like manner, was found encircling her neck, as far as the effervescent hair would allow it.

The audience at this point' grew a little fidgety; and though they did not say anything against the Oriental young gentleman, the 'cute American colonel understood it, adding two others from the audience to the committee on the stage, and leaving the young gentleman to "bob" down below **as** if to keep him out of mischief.

The other "manifestations" were really only different in detail from the first. The guitar was placed on the lap, the curtain fell and it played; so did the fiddle-out of tune, as usual-and also a little glass harmonicon with actually a soupcon of melody. A mouth-organ tootle-tooed, and what Colonel Pay described as "a single nail" **was** driven with a hammer into a piece of wood. A third of a tumbler of water laid on the lap of the Indescribable .Phenomenon **was** drunk, and the great Pail Sensation consisted in the bucket being put on her lap and then disc0vere.d slung **by** the handle around her neck. The last "manifestation" is the one to which I would draw attention; for it was by this I discovered how it was all done. A knife was put on Miss Fay's lap ; the curtain lowered, the knife pitched on to the platform, and behold the Indescribable Phenomenon stepped from the cabinet with the ligature that had bound her wrists and neck severed.

Now, all through this portion of the entertainment the audience, instead of sitting quiet, amused themselves with proposing idiotic tests, or suggesting audibly. how it was **all** done. One man behind me pertinaciously clung to the theory of a concealed boy, and trotted him to the front after every phase of the exhibition. He must have been infinitesimally, small ; but that did not matter. It was "that boy again" after every trick. One. manifestation consisted in putting a piece of paper and pair of scissors on Miss Fay's lap, and having several "tender little infants" cut out, as the Colonel phrased it.

Hereupon sprang up a 'cute individual in the room, and produced a sheet of paper he had maiked. Would Miss Fay cut out a tender little infant from that? Miss Fay consented, and of course did it, the 'cute individual retiring into private life for the rest of the evening. Another wanted Miss Fay's mouth to be bound with a handkerchief, and there

was no objection raised, until the common-sense and humanity of the audience protested against such a needless cruelty on a broiling night and in that Cumaean cave, An excited gentleman in front of me, too, whose mission .I fancy was simply to protest against the spiritual character of the phenomena (which was never asserted) would interrupt us all from time to time by declaring his intense satisfaction with it all. It was a splendid trick. We tried to convince him that 'his individual satisfaction was irrelevant to us, but it was, as Wordsworth says, "Throwing words away." It was a beautiful trick; and he was satisfied, quite satisfied.

The Dark Séance, which formed the second part of the performance, was a dreadful mistake. It was not only unsatisfactory in result, but-and no doubt this was the reason-it was so mismanaged as to threaten more than once to eventuate in a riot. Twelve or fourteen persons were to form a committee representing the audience, and to sit in a circle, with the Indescribable Phenomenon in their centre, while we remained below in Egyptian darkness and received their. report. Of course we all felt that we-if not on the committee-might just as well be sitting at home or in the next parish as in the cave of Cumae. The method of electing the committee was briefly stated by Colonel Fay to be "first come first served," and the consequence **was a** rush of some fifty excited people on to the platform, with earnest requests on the part of the proprietary to be "still." There was no **more** stillness for the rest of the evening. The fifty were pruned down to about fifteen of the most pertinacious, who would not move at any price ; in fact, the others only descended on being promised that the dark sitting should be divided ,into two, and another committee appointed. The Indescribable Phenomenon took her seat on the camp-stool in the centre, where she was to remain clapping her hands, to show she was not producing the manifestations.

The gas was put out and darkness prevailed-**darkness, but not silence.** The disappointed and rejected committee men-and women-first began to grumble **in** the freedom which the darkness secured. The committee was a packed one. They were Spiritualists. This was vigorously denied by somebody, who said he saw a Press man in the circle, and therefore (such was his logic) he could not be a Spiritualist. All this time the Indescribable Phenomenon was clapping her hands, and now some of the more restless of the audience clapped theirs in concert. The guitar and fiddle began to thump and twang, and the bells to ring, and then again the more refractory lunatics amongst us began to beat accompaniment on our hats.

The whole affair was worthy of Bedlam or Hanwell, or, let us add, an Indescribable Phenomenon.

The committee was changed with another rush, and those who were finally exiled from the hope of sitting took it out in the subsequent darkness by advising us to “beware of our pockets.” When Colonel Fay asked for quietude he was rudely requested “not to talk through his nose.” It was not to be wondered at that the séance was very brief, and the meeting adjourned.

Now to describe the indescribable. If it be a spiritual manifestation, of course there is an end of the matter; but if **a** mere conjuring trick, I would call attention to the following facts. The fastening of Miss Fay’s neck to the back of the cabinet at first is utterly gratuitous. It offers no additional difficulty to any manifestations, and appears only intended to prevent the scrutineers seeing behind her. A very simple exercise of sleight of hand would enable the gallant Colonel to cut the one ligature that binds the two wrists, when, for instance, he goes into the cabinet with scissors to trim off the ends of the piece of calico in the opening trick. The hands being once free all else is easy. The hands are never once seen during the performance. The committee can feel them, and feel the knots at the wrists ; but they cannot discover whether the ligature connecting the wrists is entire.

The last trick, be it recollected, consists in the ligature being cut and Miss Fay’s coming free to the front. If my theory is incorrect-and no doubt it & ruinously wrong-will she consent to omit the last trick and come to the front with wrists bound as she entered the cabinet? Of course, if I had suggested it, she would have done it as easily as she cut out the tender infants for the ‘cute gentleman behind me ; so, to adopt the language of Miss Fay’s fellow-citizen, I “bit in my breath and swallowed it down.” I adopted the course Mr. Maskelyne told me he did with the Davenports, sat with my eyes open and **my** mouth shut. It is marvellous to see how excited we phlegmatic islanders grow when either spirits are brought to the front, or we think we have found out a conjuring trick. I am not going to follow the example of my gushing brethren, but I can safely say that if anybody has an afternoon or evening to spare, he may do worse than go to the Crystal Palace or the Hanover Square Rooms, to see **a** very pretty and indescribable phenomenon, and to return as I did, a wiser, though perhaps a sadder man, in the proud consciousness of having “found out how it is all done.”