Title: A World of Wonders, with Anecdotes and Opinions Concerning Popular Superstitions

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Release date: June 12, 2013 [EBook #42921]

Language: English

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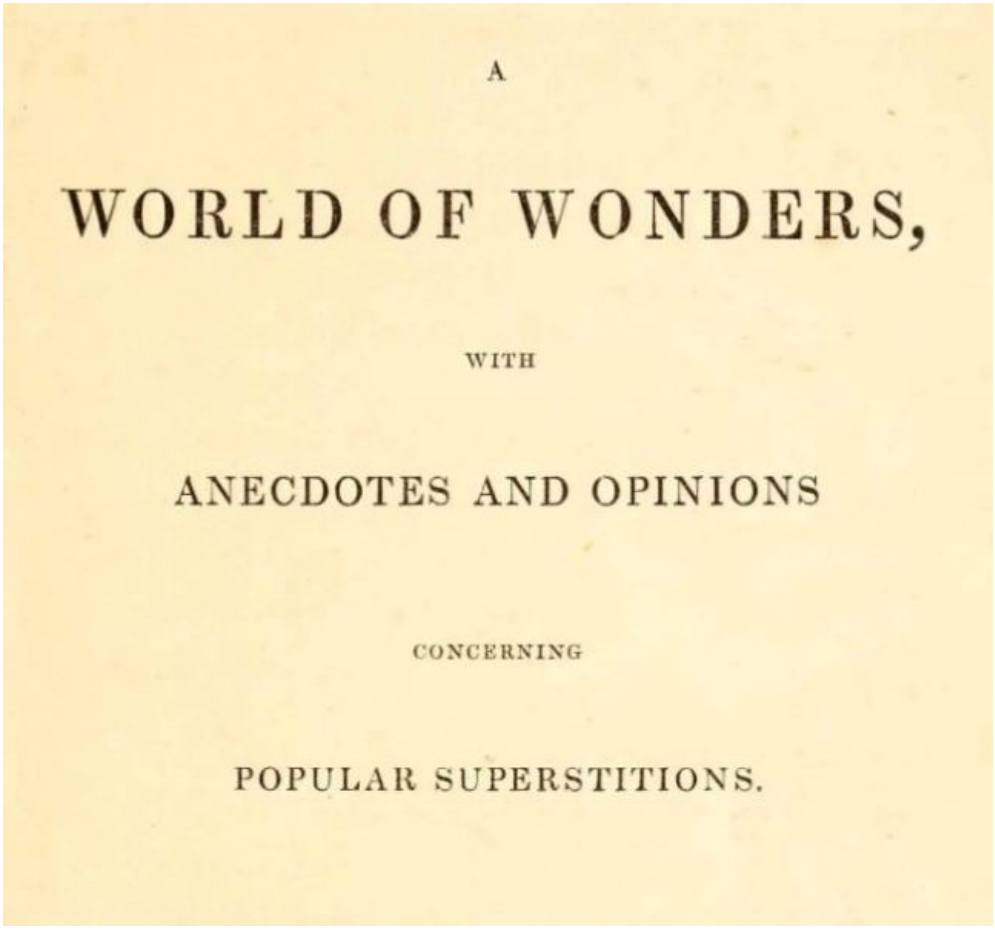

A WORLD OF WONDERS.

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ANECDOTES AND OPINIONS

CONCERNING

POPULAR SUPERSTITIONS.

EDITED BY

ALBANY POYNTZ.

LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET,
Publisher in Ordinary to Her Majesty.
1845.

LONDON:
Printed by Schulze and Co., 13, Poland Street.

PREFACE.

It is surprising, considering the gigantic strides effected by modern science, how many of the errors and prejudices engendered by the ignorance of the dark ages remain current in the world in its present days of enlightenment. Like the winged seeds of certain weeds, their light and impalpable nature renders them only the more difficult of extirpation.

A cursory review and refutation of these popular prejudices and vulgar errors has been attempted in the following Manual. A more scientific analysis of so spreading a field would have expanded into a Cyclopædia. But the ancient traditions and modern instances collected in its pages may afford the reader amusement and instruction for the passing hour, as well as an incentive to more profound investigations in hours to come.

LONDON,
NOVEMBER, 1845.

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A WORLD OF WONDERS.

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CHAPTER I.

LONGEVITY OF ANIMALS.

Most scholars are familiar with the quotation “cervi dicuntur diutissime vivere,” which has rendered proverbial the longevity of the stag. Among birds, crows and parrots have also been said to attain miraculous length of days; among fishes, the carp and pike; among reptiles, the tortoise. But modern investigation has sufficiently proved that the number of centuries, variously assigned as the natural age of these birds, beasts and fishes, was, in the first instance, the invention of poets and fabulists, carelessly adopted as authentic by lovers of the marvellous.

It is now ascertained that aloes frequently flower three times in a hundred years, and that three generations of the stag are included within the same space of time. [Pg 2]

Hesiod, an ancient Greek poet whose works have only partially reached us, was the first to institute a comparative inquiry into the age of the crow and the stag. Hesiod assigns eighty-six years as the average span of human life; yet he asserts that the rook attains eight hundred and sixty-four years, and the crow thrice as many. Towards the stag, he is still more

liberal; declaring that these animals have been known to attain their thirty-fifth century. Considering the age we assign to the world itself when Hesiod flourished in it, no great experience as to the average existence of so sempiternal an animal could have influenced his opinion.

According to many ancient writers besides Hesiod, the stag is the longest lived of animals; and the Egyptians have adopted it as the emblem of longevity. Pliny relates that one hundred years after the death of Alexander, several stags were taken in the different forests of Macedonia, to whose necks that great monarch had, with his own hand, attached collars. This extension of existence is, however, scarcely worth recording, in comparison with the instance commemorated by French historians, of a stag taken in the forest of Senlis, in the year 1037; having a collar round its neck on which was inscribed, “Cæsar hoc me donavit.”

A miraculous interpretation was assigned to this inscription, which has consequently formed [Pg 3] the ground-work of a popular error in France. The “Cæsar” of the legend was admitted, without further examination, to be Julius Cæsar, thereby allotting ten centuries as the age of the animal; nay, seventy-seven years more, seeing that Julius Cæsar conquered Gaul forty-two years before the birth of Christ. Nevertheless since the days of Julius, the title of Cæsar had been bestowed on a sufficient number of imperial potentates to explain the inscription on the collar upon more rational grounds: the Cæsar who had thus adorned the stag being in all probability its contemporary. But this was too simple an interpretation to be acceptable to those wonder-seeking times.

Aristotle decided the age of the stag, not from the showing of poets and traditions, but from the indications of experiment. Having dissected a considerable number of these animals, he pronounced their ordinary age to be was from thirty to thirty-six years. Buffon was of a similar opinion, which has been adopted by most succeeding naturalists. It has been established as a law of comparative physiology, that the life of a mammiferous animal is in proportion to its period of gestation, and the duration of its growth. The sheep and goat, who bear their young five months, and whose growth lasts two years, live from eight to ten, [Pg 4] The horse, which is borne ten months, and whose growth requires from five to six years, lives from thirty to forty. We are, of course, speaking of the horse in its natural state, uninjured by premature and excessive labour. When submitted to the hands of man, the noble animal is condemned to premature old age, by the application of spur and thong before it attains sufficient strength for the unnatural speed it is compelled to attempt, and the burthens it is forced to bear. Nor, even under these circumstances, is it allowed to attain the span of life assigned by nature; the hand of the knacker being put in request to end its days, the moment its services cease to be profitable to its master.

The camel, which is borne ten months, and requires four years for its bodily development, usually attains the age of fifty. The elephant, requiring a year’s gestation, attains the climax of its growth at thirty, and lives to a hundred. The gestation of a stag, therefore, being but of eight months, there is no reason to infer a deviation in its favour from the laws governing the nature of all other animals of the same genus.

“The stag,” says Buffon, “whose growth requires six years, lives from thirty to forty. The prodigious age originally ascribed to this animal, is a groundless invention of the poets, of which Aristotle demonstrated the absurdity.”

A variety of instances of the miraculous longevity of animals may be found in the works of [Pg 5] the early German naturalists. It is related in the collection of Voyages and Travels of Malte Brun, on the showing of these authorities, that the Emperor Frederick II. having been presented with a singularly fine pike, caused it to be thrown into a pond adjoining his palace of Kaiserslautern, after affixing to it a collar bearing the following Greek inscription: “I am the first fish cast into this pond by the hands of the Emperor Frederick II.; October 5th, 1230.”

After remaining two hundred and sixty years in the pond, the pike was taken in 1497, and carried to Heidelberg, to be served at the table of the Elector Philip; when the collar and inscription were subjected to the examination of the curious. The pike, at that time, weighed three hundred and fifty pounds, and was nineteen feet in length—a miraculous fish in every respect; for how are we to suppose that an inscription upon an elastic collar would otherwise remain legible at the close of several centuries? This story is evidently one of the marvels that figure so profusely in the chronicles of old Germany during the middle ages.

It has, however, often been asserted that aquatic animals are longer-lived than others, from being cold-blooded, and losing nothing from transpiration; though, from their peculiar nature, the fact is very difficult of demonstration. Fordyce made some curious experiments [Pg 6] upon the tenacity of life in fishes; by placing gold fishes in a variety of vessels filled with water; which, at first, he refreshed every day; then, every third day, with which refreshment, and without other nourishment, they lived for fifteen months. He next distilled the water; increased the proportion of air in the vessels; and closed the apertures, so that no insect could possibly penetrate. Nevertheless, the fish lived as before, and were in good condition.

The experimentalist now decided that the decomposition of the air afforded them sufficient nutriment; by this theory invalidating the proverb ‘that it is impossible to live on air.’

Without impugning the authenticity of these experiments, or the easy sustenance of fishes,

we may be permitted to observe that a variety of circumstances are unfavourable to the fact of their miraculous longevity. In the first place, their organization, especially that of the carp which is supposed to be one of the longest-lived of fishes, is peculiarly delicate; and the muscular effort to move in an element eight hundred times heavier than atmospheric air, must be apt to exhaust the energies of life. Such are the suggestions of common sense; too often unavailing against the marvels of tradition, accepted by the credulity of mankind.

The Parisians delight in boasting of the age of the venerable carp in the reservoirs at Fontainebleau and Chantilly; the former especially, as contemporary with Francis I. Other credulous persons declare that there exist gigantic carp many centuries old, in the water beneath the Cathedral of Strasbourg—a fact easily asserted because impossible to disprove. [Pg 7]

With respect to the tame old carp at Fontainebleau, which come to the surface of the water to be fed by every visitor to that curious old palace, the only grounds for asserting their great age is the inconclusive fact, that there were tame old grey carp in the moat of Fontainebleau in the reign of Francis I., as at the present time. But who is to prove that they are identical? There were also troops and courtiers at Fontainebleau at both epochs, whom it would be just as reasonable to assert were the same persons. The only difference is that the generations of men are visibly renewed; while the carp in the old moat slip away unnoticed, and are succeeded by a younger fry.

The longevity of certain species of the feathered kind has been just as much exaggerated as that of the stag and the carp. Willoughby states in his work on Ornithology, that a friend of his possessed a gander eighty years of age; which in the end became so ferocious that they were forced to kill it, in consequence of the havock it committed in the barn-yard. He also talks of a swan three centuries old; and several celebrated parrots are said to have attained from one hundred to one hundred and fifty years. [Pg 8]

The experiments of able naturalists afford the best answer to such statements. According to the best established authorities, pigeons, fowls, and ducks, live, in a natural state, from ten to twelve years. Magpies, crows, and jays, evince symptoms of caducity at the same age. Professor Hufeland, of Jena, who has devoted considerable time and attention to the study of the duration of life, assures us that the great eagle, and other birds of the larger kind, such as the pelican and ostrich, are very long-lived and of vigorous constitution. Specimens of the eagle tribe have been known, however, to survive in a menagerie upwards of a hundred years.

Hufeland relates that a Mr. Selwand, of London, received in 1793, from the Cape of Good Hope, a falcon wearing a golden collar inscribed “To His Majesty, King James of England, 1610.” The bird was supposed to have belonged to James I., and having escaped from its keepers, in order to avoid recapture, to have traversed Europe and Africa, to end its days in a state of nature among the Hottentots! Destiny, however, was not to be defied; and the prisoner was recaptured in its old age, and sent back to England. This incident probably originated in a hoax upon the credulity of Mr. Selwand, practised by one of his colonial correspondents. Moreover, Hufeland, after publishing his conviction of the prodigious longevity of the eagle tribe, was himself very likely to become the object of one of those mystifications, for which the supporters of new theories are considered fair game. [Pg 9]

Credulity is unfortunately a weakness common to the human race; and a tendency to exaggeration is scarcely less universal. Between the two failings, monstrous stories obtain circulation; and as it is easier to assent than examine, the world becomes overrun with errors and prejudices. A curious anecdote related from mouth to mouth, becomes exaggerated into a miracle. Thus, as regards the longevity of parrots, a bird of this species which happens to survive three generations of the same family, though the period may not exceed thirty years, is talked of in the circle of their acquaintance as a Nestor or Methuselah; till, at last, from exaggeration to exaggeration, its age becomes converted into a miracle. No one, however, can personally attest the age of a parrot beyond fifty or sixty years. All the rest must be hearsay.

Among curious examples of longevity in animals, the dog of Ulysses is cited, by many ancient authors, for the intelligence displayed in his recognition of his master after twenty years’ absence. A mule, which lived to the age of ninety years, at Athens, has also been frequently cited. [Pg 10]

The historian, Mézéray, relates, on the authority of Flodard, that Loup Asnard, Duke of Aquitaine, on coming to do homage to Raoul, King of France, about the beginning of the tenth century, appeared before the monarch mounted on a horse a hundred years old. Such exceptions, however, even if authentic, tend no more to prove the longevity of dogs, horses or mules, than the incontestible fact that certain men, even in modern times, have survived to the age of a century and a half, tend to establish that period as the span of human existence.

CHAPTER II.

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INCOMBUSTIBLE MEN.

There are instances in which it may be fairly said that seeing is not believing. In the case of a variety of persons who have exhibited themselves, in different times and countries, as endowed with the natural power of resistance to fire, the frightful feats displayed serve only to convince the spectator, that the incombustibility of the exhibitants is but a skilful effort of legerdemain.

It may be observed that the persons who pretend to this miraculous faculty, seldom expose themselves to the hazard of the investigations of the scientific world. For the exhibition of their exploits, they usually prefer small towns to great cities. In former days, incombustible men assumed, in Spain, the name of *saludores*; and most of those who have since exhibited in public their insensibility to fire, are descendants or imitators of these Spanish [Pg 12] mountebanks. The *saludores*, however, pretended to a power of curing all sorts of diseases by means of their saliva; whereas, the incombustible individuals who have figured in France and Germany, pretend only to handle fire with impunity, to swallow boiling oil, walk upon glowing embers, or even among flames; all which exploits they accomplish with perfect self-possession. So long as two hundred years ago, however, the *saludores* were recognised as impostors. Leonard Vain relates a story of one of them, who, having pretended to the faculty of sustaining the heat of a kindled oven, was forced by the populace into one, without sufficient preparation; on opening which, at the close of an hour, the man was found to be calcined. A somewhat severe mode of punishing imposture!

This example, however, did not serve to extinguish the race; and in 1806, a man who called himself the miraculous Spaniard, opened an exhibition in Paris, where he renewed all the skilful marvels of his predecessors, by walking barefooted on red hot iron, drawing heated bars across his arms, face and tongue, dipping his hands in molten lead, and swallowing, as if with zest, a glass of boiling oil. This exhibition, to which the idlers of the French capital resorted, produced a careful examination into the precedents of antiquity for similar instances of incombustibility.

Some cited the well-known lines of Virgil, with reference to the exhibitions of the priests of [Pg 13] Apollo, on Mount Soracte, where they walked unhurt, in presence of the worshippers of their divinity, upon burning embers. Others quoted the equally doubtful authority of Pliny; who relates the same fact, adding that the privilege of incombustibility was hereditary in a specific family; a fact the more remarkable, because all the modern jugglers in this branch of the black art, pretend to descend from St. Catherine.

Varro, less credulous than Pliny, expressly states that the priests of the Temple of Soracte possessed the secret of a composition which rendered them fire-proof.

Long after Varro, Strabo related that the votaries of the goddess Feronia obtained, as the price of their devotions, the faculty of walking unhurt over burning piles; and that the exhibition of this miraculous power before her altars, attracted numerous spectators.

“The worship of the goddess Feronia,” says Strabo, “is much in vogue; her temple being remarkable as the site of a miracle. Those persons whose prayers the goddess deigns to propitiate, are enabled to defy the most ardent flames. This miracle is renewed at her annual festival.”

It is also related that, not far from the city of Thyane, the birth-place of Apollonius, there was a celebrated temple dedicated to Diana Persica; the virgins devoted wherein to the [Pg 14] worship of the goddess of Chastity, possessed the power and privilege of treading unhurt upon burning embers. A confirmation of these wonders is to be found in Aristotle and Apuleius.

When the visitors of the miraculous Spaniard had satisfied themselves, that antiquity supplied a variety of examples in substantiation of the power to which he pretended, modern history was searched for further attestation; when it appeared that Ambrose Paré and Cardan, depose to having seen mountebanks so inured to the effects of molten lead and boiling oil, that they were able to wash their faces and hands, unhurt, with those terrible materials. Delrio, Delancre, and Bodin, advance many curious facts of a similar nature.

Had these incombustible individuals existed in the days when trial by ordeal was still a form of law; or, rather, had the Art of Chemistry attained at that period the power of hardening the human skin into resistance of fire, the secret would have been invaluable.

In those barbarous ages, a culprit sentenced to the fiery ordeal of walking upon heated ploughshares, or plunging his limbs into boiling oil, was tacitly condemned to death. We may infer, however, that Kings, Queens, and Dignitaries of the Church were of a less combustible nature than humbler mortals; for when these were forced to submit to the terrible ordeal of [Pg 15] fire, it was observed that they escaped unsinged; while serfs and beggars, burnt like tinder: an understanding with the cruel executioners of these savage laws, being essential to establish the innocence of an accused person.

It would appear as though a sinister influence had always attached itself to the ill-fated See

of Autun; for one of the first instances on record of the ordeal of fire being applied to a member of the hierarchy, was that of Simplicius, Bishop of Autun, who, after submitting to it in his life-time, was canonized after death. Two later Bishops of Autun—the Abbé Roquette, said to be the original of the Tartuffe of Molière, and the Prince de Talleyrand, one of the most remarkable personages of modern times, have certainly not experienced the same posthumous distinction.

Simplicius, being a married man, when called to the honours of the See of Autun, repudiated his wife, to whom he was tenderly attached. He was, nevertheless, accused of retaining her conjugally in his palace after his promotion to the mitre; in disproof of which, he submitted, and caused his beloved wife to submit to the fiery ordeal in presence of a vast congregation; when, both having escaped unhurt, Simplicius was eventually promoted to the honour of the Calendar.

St. Brie, the successor of St. Martin in the See of Tours, was also accused of having become [Pg 16] a father, to the discredit of his episcopal functions; a charge he is said to have defeated by bestowing powers of speech upon the infant, thereby enabling it to name its real father. In addition to this exculpation, he submitted to the fiery ordeal; and having gathered up his robe, and filled it with burning embers, proceeded in this guise to the tomb of his predecessor, St. Martin, without experiencing the slightest injury. It is not added in the legend, whether the garments of the Bishop were also uninjured.

One of the most celebrated trials by fire on record, is that of Thuitberge, wife of Lothaire, King of France. Having been accused of more than becoming intimacy with the young Prince, her brother, and condemned to the ordeal, she had the good fortune to find a champion willing to undertake it in her behalf. These champions or proxies were tantamount to the special pleaders of the present day, being mostly hired by fee or reward for the purpose. The champion of Thuitberge managed to establish her innocence, by plunging his arm without injury into a cauldron of boiling water; after which, Lothaire was compelled to admit the injustice of his accusation, and retain her as his wife. Even at that epoch, however, mistrust had arisen on this score; and certain servitors of the King openly insinuated the [Pg 17] existence of chemical compositions, by the application of which a man might fortify his flesh against the action of boiling fluids. Appeal from the decision of an ordeal was, however, decided to be impossible.

A celebrated Father of the Oratoire, the Père Lebrun, published a recipe purporting to insure impunity against fire; consisting of equal parts of alcohol, sulphur, ammonia, essence of rosemary, and onion juice. At the moment Père Lebrun was devoting himself to experiments on the mysteries of incombustibles, an English practician, named Richardson, was amazing the world of science by the performance of prodigies. This person contrived to walk upon burning embers, to place burning sulphur upon his hand, then transferring it to his tongue, allow it to consume away without apparent injury. He also allowed a piece of meat, or an oyster, to be cooked upon his tongue; the fire for the purpose being kept up in a live coal by a pair of bellows. He was also able to grasp a red hot bar of iron, and even seize it between his teeth; to swallow molten glass and a mixture of burning pitch and sulphur, so that the flames burst from his mouth as from that of a furnace; just as common mountebanks emit fire from their mouths by means of a coal wrapt in tow, which has been previously steeped in spirits of wine.

These experiments attracted so much attention, that scientific men considered them [Pg 18] deserving notice; and in 1677, Dodart, of the French Academy of Sciences, addressed a letter on the subject to the Journal de Science, proving that such phenomena might be achieved by time, address, and perseverance, without the intervention of chemical agency. The ordinary hardening of the hands and feet by labour and exercise, certainly induce a belief that perseverance in the same means might be made to produce absolute callosity.

It is well known, that bakers are remarkable for the muscularity of their arms and slightness of their legs; while dancers have usually slender arms and muscular legs. The difference of exercise, necessitated by their several professions, producing diverse development of limb. On the other hand, there is no need to compare the sole of the foot of a lady who seldom goes out, unless in a carriage, or treads on any other material than luxurious carpets, with that of a peasant who goes bare-footed on the flinty road, without inconvenience, to be assured that the same degree of boiling water which could be sustained by the latter without inconvenience, would blister the delicate epidermis of the former.

Dodart observes that, in the ordinary circumstances of life, some people are able to swallow their food much hotter than others; and that, as regards the experiments of Richardson, charcoal loses its heat the moment it is extinguished, and is easily extinguished by means of [Pg 19] the human saliva. It is a common trick of jugglers to put lighted tapers into their mouths; and in the attempts made by Richardson to cook a piece of meat upon his tongue, the slice was made so to envelop the ember, as to secure his mouth from contact with the fire; while the bellows used during the process, on pretence of keeping up the flame, were on the contrary, intended to cool the mouth. As to the mixtures of boiling wax, pitch and sulphur, Dodart states their temperature to have been such, that he could hold his finger in them two seconds without pain. It is well known that the workmen in the foundries are so inured to heat, as to touch, without injury, metals in a state of fusion; frequently plunging their hands into molten lead, in order to recover articles of value. Moreover, as regards any ignited

substance placed in the mouth, it naturally becomes extinguished the moment the lips are reclosed; the gas from the human lungs tending especially to that purpose.

About the year 1774, there lived at the foundry of Laune, a man who could walk unharmed over bars of red-hot iron, and hold burning coals in his hands. The skin of this man was observed to emit a sort of unctuous transpiration, which served as his preservative.

These facts suffice to prove that the miraculous Spaniard, who affected preternatural incombustibility, had no need of magic for the working of his wonders. For another case, equally remarkable, we are indebted to Sementini, an eminent Professor of Chemistry at Naples. [Pg 20]

A Sicilian, named Lionetti, came to that city for the purpose of exhibiting feats of incombustibility; and soon excited public astonishment by his power of drawing a red-hot plate of iron over his hair without singeing it, on which he afterwards stamped with his naked feet. He also drew rods of red-hot iron through his mouth, swallowed boiling oil, dipped his fingers in molten lead, and dropped some on his tongue. He fearlessly exposed his face to the flames of burning oil; poured sulphuric or muriatic acid upon lighted embers, and imbibed the fumes; ending by allowing a thick gold pin to be thrust deep into his flesh.

The Neapolitans were as much enchanted by the feats of Lionetti as the Parisian with those of the incombustible Spaniard. But at Naples, Sementini, who was on the watch, perceived that, at the moment the fire-proof man applied the heated materials to his skin, there escaped a whitish vapour. Instead of swallowing a glass of boiling oil, according to his announcement, he introduced only a quarter of a spoonful into his mouth, and a few drops of molten lead upon his tongue, which was covered with a white fur, like the secretion perceptible in cases of fever. When he took the hot iron between his teeth, symptoms of suppressed pain were perceptible; and the edges of his teeth were evidently charred by previous performances of a similar description. From these appearances, Sementini inferred that Lionetti made use of certain preparations which secured him against the influence of heat, by hardening the epidermis; and that his skin having become callous from use, was in itself able to resist, to a certain degree, the action of fire. These conclusions, which concur with those made by Dodart, in the case of Richardson, were verified by personal observation and careful experiment. [Pg 21]

After many fruitless attempts to discover the chemical agents used by the Incombustibles, the persevering Sementini found that by frequent frictions of sulphuric acid, he was able to inure his flesh to the contact of red-hot iron; and we are bound to admire the patience and courage of those who, for the benefit of scientific discovery, attempt experiments of so powerful and perilous a nature. To have exposed a fallacy in matters of science, is equal to the discovery of a fact; and the extirpation of a single error or false conclusion from the popular mind, is an act deserving of gratitude.

Sementini found that by bathing the parts thus deprived of their usual sensitiveness with a solution of alum, their former sensibility to heat was restored; and one day, happening to smear with soap the parts he had re-softened in this manner with alum, he found, to his great surprise, that they became hardened anew against the action of heat. The experimentalist instantly applied to his tongue a preparation of soap, and found that it enabled him to defy the contact of iron heated to a white heat. To neutralize the faculty thus acquired, he had only to sprinkle his tongue with sugar; a new application of soap serving at any moment to render it fire-proof. [Pg 22]

By these experiments, in various countries, the pretension to a supernatural power of incombustibility has been reduced to its true level. The Priests of Soracte, the Virgins of Diana, the Champion of Queen Thuitberge, and the Bishop of Autun, were doubtless adepts in the art of the miraculous Spaniard; and according to the recipe of Sementini, a man may be enabled to defy the element of fire as successfully as an expert swimmer overmasters that of water, or an experienced aëronaut of air.

CHAPTER III. [Pg 23]

VENTRILOQUISTS.

Ventriloquists are a better order of jugglers than the Incombustibles. The feats of the latter are doubtless more surprising—the former, far more amusing. To behold a man expose himself to even the semblance of a cruel torture, affords a disgusting species of excitement; and such exhibitions as those we have described, the feat of swallowing naked swords, or the favourite practice of placing in contact with half-tamed beasts of prey a human being who submits to the risk for the sake of a scanty remuneration, is an order of public entertainment that does little honour to the taste of the listless spectator.

To witness feats of ventriloquism, on the contrary, is a diverting and harmless pastime; though, had Messieurs Comte and Alexandre exhibited their marvellous powers in the olden time, there is some probability that they might have been exposed to jeopardy as sorcerers and magicians, or to exorcism, as possessed of devils. [Pg 24]

Ventriloquism derives its name from an error of the ancients. So far from being effected through the body, the mouth is the sole instrument of the art or faculty we call ventriloquism. The first inference formed on this subject was by the Greeks, who conceived the oracles of the Pythoness to consist of the emanation of the soul from the viscera; and as the lips of ventriloquists assumed the same form in the exercise of their art as those of the Pythoness during her pretended inspirations, they ascribed the effort to the same region of the body.

Archbishop Eustatius, in treating of the Witch of Endor, attributes the exploits of the magician Ob, in invoking the shade of Samuel, and obtaining a reply from the apparition, to a devil, or the power of ventriloquism. In the Book of the Septanti, the Witch of Endor is described as a ventriloquist.

Father Delrio, as an interpreter of the opinion of the ancients, and Henri Boguet, the great legist, declared from the bench, that all persons endowed with a natural power of ventriloquism, had hoarse, harsh voices, and that the spirit by which they were possessed, must be dislodged by exorcism.

In the earlier days of ventriloquism, from the Witch of Endor downwards, the art appears to have been almost peculiar to the female sex; though in our own times professed only by males. In the fifteenth century, Rolande du Vernois, accused of the exercise of ventriloquism, was condemned and burnt as a witch; and about the middle of the sixteenth, the inhabitants of Lisbon were amazed by the feats of a woman named Cecilia, who possessed the art of causing her voice to issue from her elbow, foot, or any other part of her body. In exhibiting this apparently preternatural power, she pretended to have an invisible colleague, named Pierre Jean, with whom she appeared to hold conversations; an exploit that exposed her to a charge of witchcraft. She was tried for magic, and exiled to the Island of St. Thomas, in remission of a sentence to be burnt alive. [Pg 25]

In the same century, a little old woman who had very much the air of a witch, and whose voice appeared to issue from the centre of her body, made her appearance in Italy, where she was arraigned for sorcery; but her further history is unrecorded.

A female ventriloquist, named Barbara Jacobi, narrowly escaped being burnt at the stake in 1685, at Haarlem, where she was an inmate of the public hospital. The curious daily resorted thither to hear her hold a dialogue with an imaginary personage with whom she conversed as if concealed behind the curtains of her bed. This individual, whom she called Joachim, and to whom she addressed a thousand ludicrous questions, which he answered in the same familiar strain, was for some time supposed to be a confederate. But when the bystanders attempted to search for him behind the curtains, his voice instantly reproached them with their curiosity from the opposite corner of the room. As Barbara Jacobi had contrived to make herself familiar with all the gossip of the city of Haarlem, the revelations of the pretended familiar were such as to cause considerable embarrassment to those who beset her with impertinent questions. [Pg 26]

The celebrated Thiémet used to exhibit at Paris a scene of a similar nature, afterwards copied in London in the Monopolylogues of Matthews. Having concealed himself in a sentry-box, which occupied the centre of his small stage, the distant sound of a horn became audible; then, the cry of a pack of hounds gradually approaching; during the intervals of which, a miller and his wife were heard familiarly conversing in bed concerning their household affairs. In the midst of their conversation, a knock was heard; and a strange noise became audible from without, entreating the miller to rise and show the way through the forest to a young Baron, who had lost the track of the hounds. The miller promised compliance; when an altercation ensued between him and his wife; the former wishing to rise, the latter preventing him with a declaration that she had not courage to be left alone in the mill. At length, the miller gets the better; and, having risen, is about to put on his clothes, when the sobs and cries of his abandoned spouse determine him to return to bed; and the scene used to terminate with a loud exclamation on the part of the lady when the cold knees of the miller apprized her of his return. This somewhat too familiar exhibition used to elicit roars of laughter from the most fashionable audiences; nor, till Thiémet issued from his sentry-box, could they be prevailed upon to believe that he had been alone. [Pg 27]

Ventriloquism is, in truth, the working of a curious problem in acoustics; the art resulting from a careful computation of distances and effects in the science of sound. The resources afforded by such an art to the priesthood of antiquity, who were thus enabled to create an oracle wherever they thought proper, may easily be understood. When exercised with dexterity, it was no wonder that the bewildered populace should exclaim, like the Sybil of Cumæ, “Deus! ecce Deus!” Dodona and Delphos are now generally believed to have been simply the scene of a clever exhibition of ventriloquism. Fontenelle, and the learned Benedictine, Dom Calmet, have both written extensively on the subject; the latter, more especially, labouring to prove that a variety of marvels related by Lucian, Philostratus, Iamblicus, and other eminent authors, are easily explained by ventriloquism.

Many French historians attribute to the same origin the apostrophe of the pretended Spectre in the Forest of Mans, which so terrified the feeble Charles VI., as to deprive him of reason. Such was the opinion of the Abbé de la Chapelle; who, in 1772, published a volume on ventriloquism, in which, among other examples, he cites the wonderful faculty of a grocer named St. Gilles, residing at St. Germain en Laye; who, when visited by the Abbé, made his voice appear to issue from every part of the house. St. Gilles appears to have been a facetious personage as well as a skilful ventriloquist; for as he was one day walking in the forest of St. Germain, with a rich Prebendary, celebrated for his avarice and clerical abuses, a voice was heard to reproach him with his pluralities and covetousness, threatening to bury him under the ruins of his prebendal house, unless he reformed the errors of his ways. The grocer being careful to assume an appearance of the same terror that paralyzed his companion, the priest regarded this interposition as the voice of his good angel; and instantly proceeding to the nearest church, dropped the whole contents of his purse into the poor's box; and on his return to Paris, devoted the remainder of his days to repentance and good works. [Pg 28]

On another occasion, St. Gilles exercised his art in restoring family peace to a young couple. The husband who had abandoned a young and lovely wife, having accompanied him into the depths of the forest of St. Germain for a morning walk, was also addressed by a supernatural voice, threatening him with eternal punishment unless he renounced his dissolute habits, and returned to the bosom of domestic life; a stratagem which produced the happiest results. [Pg 29]

One of the most skilful proficients in the art, appears to have been a Baron von Mengen, a German nobleman, as celebrated at Vienna, as St. Gilles in France. The Baron never appeared in society without carrying a doll in his pockets, with which he used to hold imaginary conversations. An English traveller, amazed by the wit and wisdom of the doll, became at length so excited by curiosity, as to insinuate his hand into the Baron's pocket, in the hope of discovering his secret; when the doll instantly shrieked aloud, and bitterly reproached the Englishman for his breach of decorum. The amazement of the abashed foreigner increasing, the Baron produced his doll, and explained the nature of the mystery.

Philippe, a favourite actor of the Théâtre des Variétés, on his marriage with Mademoiselle Volnais, the actress, proceeded with her into Lorraine to visit an estate they had purchased; when the tenants having thought proper to favour them with a magnificent reception, in the course of the day, the bridegroom, deserting his place of honour, strolled out among the revellers. While he appeared to be only conversing in a grave manner with the Mayor of the place, to the dismay of the simple villagers, strange voices were heard to issue from tuns of wine, reproaching them with their excesses; and from wheelbarrows, reproving them for their idleness. The whole village fancied itself bewitched; while Philippe enjoyed, for the first time of his life, on his own account, a talent he had so often exercised for the amusement of others. [Pg 30]

Comte, the best ventriloquist now extant, has performed a thousand similar exploits. When on his travels in Belgium, he caused the voice of Margaret of Austria, to issue from her tomb in the Church of Bron, addressing a reprimand to the verger. At Rheims, he was nearly the cause of depopulating the quarter of St. Nicholas, by causing voices to issue from a variety of graves in the church-yard; while at Nevers, he revived the miracle of Balaam, by enabling an overladen ass to reproach its master with his cruelty.

Another time, Monsieur Comte, when travelling by night in a diligence, the travellers of which had fallen asleep, roused them from their slumbers by a confusion of voices of robbers at the windows, calling aloud upon the postillions to stop. The greatest consternation prevailed; when Monsieur Comte offered to negociate for them with the robbers, and become the depositary of their purses for the purpose. Having alighted from the carriage for this object, he was heard conversing in the dark road with a variety of voices, breathing the most frightful threats; and the travellers considered themselves fortunate in being allowed to purchase their lives by the cession of all they had about them. When daylight broke, their adroit fellow-traveller restored their property; the mere mention of his name sufficing to explain the nature of the jest which had produced their alarm. [Pg 31]

On another occasion, he preserved the statues and carvings of a village church from mutilation, by causing a voice to issue from the altar, commanding the forbearance of the rustic population. He was, however, very near falling a victim to the marvels of his art, at Fribourg; where the populace, asserting him to be a sorcerer, fell upon him, and would have thrown him into a heated oven to be consumed, but for the intervention of the authorities.

Nevertheless, in defiance of these well-known facts, ventriloquism still appears miraculous to the vulgar. Thirty years ago, the learned Abbé Fiard wrote a treatise to prove that the ancients were justified in their belief that it proceeded from spiritual possession. Fortunately, the great majority are content to accept it as a fertile source of recreation, without troubling themselves concerning the origin of the faculty.

CHAPTER IV.

[Pg 32]

POPE JOAN AND THE WANDERING JEW.

In the history of the world a variety of imaginary personages have found a place, whom it has become difficult to dislodge. Created in the first instance by the blunders of some careless writer, or by the sickly fancy of some unsound judgment, they are adopted by popular favour, tricked up according to its caprices, and committed to the hands of tradition to mislead the opinions of posterity. The pretensions of a false Demetrius, a false Dauphin, a false Heraclius, a Lambert Simnel, or a Perkin Warbeck, are more easily disproved and set aside than those of the mere shadows which flit over the surface of history; too impalpable to be seized upon and compelled to render an account of themselves.

Among these phantoms are Pope Joan, and the Wandering Jew; of whom every one has heard something, though nothing to the purpose. Yet these imaginary personages are too closely connected with the mysteries of our faith to be otherwise than generally interesting. [Pg 33]

For how many years did the legend of the Wandering Jew, the porter of Pilate, condemned to roam the earth till the second coming of Christ, and having his necessities provided for by five-pence, which remained inexhaustibly in his purse, obtain favour with the world—perpetually renewed and brightened by the inventive hand of genius! Even now, though no longer an article of belief among the enlightened classes, his story obtains sufficient credit with the vulgar to merit a certain degree of examination.

The first writer who signalized the existence of the Wandering Jew, was Matthew Paris, an English chronicler of the thirteenth century; who was perhaps ignorant that he was only renewing a fable of the Greeks; Suidas having recorded that a Greek named Pasès possessed a miraculous piece of money, which as often as he expended it returned again into his pocket.

Some inventors have too much modesty to pretend to originality. So it was with Matthew Paris; who affected to have learned the legend of the Wandering Jew from an Armenian Bishop, who spent some time in England. This eastern dignitary, he asserts, had actually seen and conversed with the Wandering Jew, whose name he stated to be Cartophilax; that he was porter to the tribunal to which Jesus was conveyed by the Roman soldiers; and had [Pg 34] familiarly known the Virgin Mary and the Apostles. All the romantic incidents of his story which have passed into an article of popular faith, were first related by Matthew Paris.

But may there not have been some allegorical or concealed sense connected with the first creation of the Wandering Jew? At this period, Jews were objects of universal persecution, and often publicly burnt. Is it not likely enough that Matthew Paris intended to typify the whole persecuted and wandering people of the Jews in the person of Cartophilax; or, may he not have purposed to afford a means of safety and impunity to any Jew who saw fit to take up the character?

For thirteen centuries, then—as for eighteen, now—the Jewish people had been driven from place to place, tracked like a beast of prey, and subjected to every species of ignominy. Their destiny, in short, was a mere extended exemplification of the fortunes of the Wandering Jew. May not, moreover, the eternal five-pence have been intended to show, that wherever he finds himself, a Jew can never be long in want of money? Montesquieu only expresses the general opinion on this subject, in saying, “Wherever you find gold, you will find a Jew.”

This theory will probably be regarded as more apocryphal than the existence of Cartophilax! [Pg 35] Nevertheless we would rather pin our faith on a fanciful interpretation, than admit that a writer of so much moment to the History of the World as the famous Matthew Paris, could voluntarily shake the stability of his Chronicles by the wanton fabrication of such a miracle.

The invention of Pope Joan is still more easily accounted for; as originating in the desire of the Reformed Church to expose to contempt the honour of the See of Rome. No contemporary writer so much as alludes to her existence; nor till sixty years after the period assigned as that of her adventures, do we find the monk Radulphus relating the scandalous chronicle of her pretended pontificate. A story of this description once set afloat, will never want for commentators; and a variety of other writers instantly seized upon it, improving the details at leisure.

Seldom, however, has an imposture been adopted by such grave judgments, or promulgated by such authoritative voices, as that of Pope Joan. But the fact is that party spirit, or rather sectarian spirit, blinded the eyes of these abettors of fraud. At the moment of the grand schism originating the Reformed Church, the partizans of the new Faith seized upon the old wife’s tale of Pope Joan, and converted it into a serious argument against the infallibility of Rome.

“You boast of the assistance of divine grace, you pretend to the inspiration of the Holy [Pg 36] Ghost,” said they to the Catholics; “that it directs your councils and suggests your elections. How came it, then, that with so omniscient a counsellor, you were deluded into promoting a woman to the Papal See?—The single name of Pope Joan ought to suffice to attest the incompetency of your Church!”

The history of this pretended personage has been too often related, and is of too gross a nature to deserve recital. Even the historians who have been most serious in its attestation, disagree in the leading incidents; some of them naming the female Pope Agnes, some Joan, and some Gilberta. Voltaire, who was little prone to defend the purity of the See of Rome, utterly discredits her existence; and in all Protestant countries, where the fable was first called into existence, the name of Pope Joan is cited only as a matter of jest and derision.

CHAPTER V.

[Pg 37]

THE FABLES OF HISTORY.

It is surprising how many of the facts of history have been reduced into fictions by the careful investigations of modern enlightenment. For centuries, it was established as an undeniable enormity of the empire, that the Emperor Justinian put out the eyes of Belisarius. Tragedies, operas and romances, were grounded upon this cruel incident; and the arts have lent their aid to the perpetuation of a popular error.

Let us examine the real state of the case. In 563, a conspiracy was discovered against the Emperor Justinian; and the conspirators were arrested on the eve of executing their criminal design. Certain of his favourites, envious of the great name of Belisarius, suborned false witnesses, whose testimony made it appear that he was included in the plot; upon which, Justinian indulged in the bitterest reproaches against his perfidy. Belisarius, strong in his sense of innocence, and the consciousness of the great services he had rendered to the [Pg 38] empire, disdained to justify himself; and Justinian, weak, versatile, and mistrustful, influenced by a paltry pusillanimity, caused him to be stripped of his offices, made prisoner in his house, and deprived of all attendants or companions.

This state of things continued for the space of seven months; when the innocence of Belisarius was, by the intervention of others, brought to light; and he was at once restored to his former honours and the confidence of his master. So far from being deprived of sight, and guided about by a youth, as our imaginations have been misled into depicting him by a variety of artists and men of letters, Belisarius died at an advanced age in the full enjoyment of his senses.

The two first authors who thought proper to load the memory of Justinian with the odium of having put out the eyes of Belisarius, were Crinitus and Raphael Mafféi, both belonging to the sixteenth century. No anterior writer makes the smallest allusion to this act of barbarity; which, had it been authentic, could scarcely have been buried in obscurity for a period of ten centuries. The event which probably gave rise to so monstrous a supposition was, the disgrace of Carpocratian; who, after being the chief favourite of Justinian, was driven into exile in Egypt, and compelled to beg his bread on the highways. But even in this instance, [Pg 39] the fallen man was not deprived of sight.

One day, a village priest who was preaching in France, on the instability of riches and the misfortunes of the great, perceiving his simple flock to be melted into tears by the pathetic nature of his recital, comforted them by adding, “Nevertheless, my brethren, take comfort, for, after all, these traditions may be greatly exaggerated.” It were as well, perhaps, if historians were equally candid, more especially the one who first treated of the cruel fortunes of Belisarius.

This great man had, in truth, no need of factitious enhancements to secure the sympathies of the sixteenth century; the nobleness of his character having fully equalled the greatness of his exploits. As the conqueror of the Goths, he sustained the fortunes of the empire; sacrificing himself for his master, and refusing a crown when the throne was easily accessible. After he had achieved the conquest of Italy, the jealousy of Justinian recalled him from his command. Yet when the fortunes of his country stood a second time in need of his sword, he did not hesitate to lay down his resentment, and take up arms for its defence.

A far more authentic instance of undeserved misfortune is the case of Œdipus, who, born the heir of the throne, was secretly removed from the palace in consequence of a prediction that [Pg 40] he would become the murderer of his father. To avoid the accomplishment of the oracle, the infant was about to be destroyed; the servant, to whom the task was assigned, having literally pierced his feet, and suspended him to the branches of a tree; when unfortunately a shepherd, taking pity on the tortured babe, relieved him and conveyed him to the Court of the Queen of Corinth, by whom, being childless, he was reared as her son. At eighteen years of age, an oracle enjoined him to go in search of his parents; and on his travels, having killed a man by whom he was insulted, the victim proved to be his father.

Œdipus arrives at Thebes. A riddle is proposed to him, the sense of which he is so unfortunate as to guess; and having by this feat rid the country of the Sphinx, he receives the promised reward in the hand of the Queen of Thebes, who, in process of time, proves to

be the mother of her young husband. In consequence of this parricide and incest, a frightful pestilence afflicts Thebes; and Œdipus in despair, puts out his own eyes, banishes himself from his native country, and is followed into exile by his daughter Antigone, who officiates as his guide.

Such misfortunes naturally inspired the minds of the heathens with a belief in the doctrine of fatality—a blind interpretation of events which also served to induce a belief in the marvellous, and confirm half the preposterous superstitions perpetuated by the weakness of [Pg 41] the human race.

Nothing can be more groundless, by the way, than our vain assertion of being the only created beings who “contemplate Heaven with brow erect.” Not only do we share this distinction with the ourang-outangs, but with a variety of birds, such as the crane and the ostrich; which, on this point, are better qualified than ourselves, seeing that instead of the upper eyelid falling, the lower eyelid rises over the eye; thus leaving them more at liberty to raise their eyes to Heaven.

False pretensions and vulgar errors of this kind abound in the world:—as for instance, the belief that the pelican pierces her bosom to feed her little ones with her blood—that the scent of bean-flowers produces delirium—that the mole is blind—that the dove is a model of gentleness and conjugal fidelity; and how often are the questions still mooted whether Hannibal really worked a passage through the Alps with vinegar—whether the coffin of Mahomet be really suspended at Mecca between two loadstones—whether shooting stars be fragments of shattered planets, or souls progressing from purgatory—whether beasts of prey are afraid of fire; and whether human nature have ever exhibited affinities with the brute creation in the form of fauns, dryads, satyrs, or centaurs.

The fable of the centaurs explains itself naturally enough by the wonder created in the world [Pg 42] by the first man hardy enough to reduce the horse to a state of submission, and convert it into a domestic animal. We know that a man on horseback has been regarded as a complex animal by many savage nations; just as the Peruvians, when attacked by the artillery of Pizarro, believed their invaders to be Gods, seeing that thunder was at their disposal.

As to fauns and satyrs, which probably consisted of shepherds whose lower extremities were clad in goat skins, Herodotus declares that a whole nation of them existed among the mountains of Scythia. Plutarch relates that, in the time of Sylla, a faun was caught at Nymphea near Apollonia, which was brought as a present to the Dictator. The creature could utter no articulate sound,—its voice consisting of a noise between the cry of a goat and the neighing of a horse; but exhibited social qualities, and was much addicted to female society. This was probably some deaf and dumb idiot, left by unnatural parents to perish in infancy, and miraculously preserved; as in the case of Peter, the Wild Boy, found during the last century in the forests of Westphalia, and maintained at the cost of the King of England to a good old age. A similar specimen of degraded humanity was exhibited at Paris under the [Pg 43] name of the Savage of Aveyron; and the historical fable of Valentine and Orson was probably founded on some similar circumstance.

According to Philostratus, a satyr was taken in Ethiopia of so mild and gentle a disposition, as to have been easily tamed; and that certain of the simeous tribes, such, for instance, as the ourang-outang called the Wild Man of the Woods, should have been considered a satyr by both Greeks and Romans, on a first inspection seems natural enough. St. Jerome, in his life of St. Anthony, asserts that he encountered a satyr in the desart, and that they conversed and breakfasted together.

We should have thought these holy personages more in danger of an encounter with wild beasts; concerning which peril, a passing remark may be made, that the idea of frightening them away by fire is a popular prejudice. Tavernier relates that some soldiers having lighted a great fire to preserve themselves from the damp, in a forest of Africa, were set upon by a lion, and that one of the men was greatly injured by this midnight intruder, which was luckily shot dead by one of his comrades.

As regards the popular opinion concerning the tomb of Mahomet, it is now proved to be at Medina instead of Mecca, where the belief of many centuries assigned it a place; but so far from being suspended in the air by a loadstone, the coffin lies on the ground surrounded by [Pg 44] an iron balustrade. A learned Jesuit, by dint of many patient experiments, ascertained the possibility of sustaining a human body in the air by the power of the loadstone. But the quantity employed only served to realize the miracle for the space of two seconds. On the discovery of the singular properties of the loadstone, as affecting the polarization of the needle, the vulgar naturally began to endow it with miraculous powers. In 1765, the Journal Encyclopédique published an Essay attributing to the loadstone the power of curing the tooth-ache; the person afflicted being required to turn his face towards the North Pole, and touch the aching tooth with the southern point of a magnetic needle. The system was pursued for a time by a variety of quack dentists, but soon fell to the ground.

With respect to shooting stars, philosophy remains undecided as to their origin. But vulgar superstition clings to the belief that any wish formed during the transit of one of these luminous bodies will be accomplished. This idea probably purported in the first instance to demonstrate the transitory nature of human wishes, as exemplified in the momentary glimpse of the meteor. Some philosophers attribute shooting stars to the encounter of the

electric fluid with inflammable molecules in the atmosphere. Descartes asserts that they are terrestrial particles which, meeting in the air the second element, take fire and fall back to earth; leaving where they fall a viscous matter. The truth is that they have never been known to fall back upon the earth. Monsieur Biot has hazarded a conjecture that they may be fragments of comets, falling with immense rapidity through the realms of space. [Pg 45]

If this point of popular prejudice remain unremoved, nothing can be more certain than that the mole possesses organs of vision—though small; and that the fable of the maternal tenderness of the pelican, originated in the flexible pouch in which she deposits the fish she collects for her own food, and that of her young. The proverbial fidelity of the dove to her mate has been equally disproved by naturalists; no person having ever kept a pair of doves without noticing that they are birds of a peculiarly irascible and quarrelsome nature.

CHAPTER VI. [Pg 46]

MELONS AND MONSTERS.

It might form an important matter of inquiry for naturalists, whether the fruits appropriated by Providence to certain climates, do not become unwholsome when transferred to others by the intervention of art. Certain it is, that in various countries of the South, melons constitute an article of national food; whereas, in the North, they pass for one of the most pernicious productions of the vegetable kingdom; being the first article of food interdicted during the prevalence of the cholera.

The origin of the melon, however, appears very uncertain. Far from being indigenous in Italy, it was asserted by the Roman naturalists to have been brought from Africa by Metellus; while others believe it to have been derived from their earlier Asiatic conquests. Scipio is said by some to have first introduced it into Rome. From whatever source derived, [Pg 47] the gardeners of Greece and Rome made the culture of the melon a subject of especial study. Pliny spoke of the delicacy and flavour of the fruit as well as of its indigestibility. It may be observed, however, that in the more ancient bas-reliefs and frescoes of fruit found in Herculaneum, the melon does not appear.

The modern arts of horticulture have added innumerable varieties of the melon to the round and oblong species known to the Romans; and Godoy, the Prince of Peace, devoted himself in Spain to the improvement of this favourite fruit. It is a mistake, however, to suppose that the fine kind called the Cantalupe, reached us from that country; the name being derived from the village of Cantalupi near Rome, famous for the cultivation of its melons. In Spain and France, the melon is eaten with roast meat, at dinner; in England and Russia, it is eaten with sugar at dessert. By many people the crudeness is qualified with pepper and ginger; but the Bavarian mother of the Regent, Duke of Orleans, provoked much criticism in Paris by powdering her slice of melon with Spanish snuff, according to the custom in some parts of Germany.

A strange object of luxury in the same country consists in snails. A large white species of snail, much cultivated at Ulm, is sent to various parts of Germany. One of the popular errors concerning these snails, is the opinion that when decapitated the body will produce a new [Pg 48] head. Spallanzani and Voltaire tried the experiment on innumerable snails, and attest that a head was really reproduced. It is well known that the body of a fly will exist some time after being deprived of its head; and that, on crushing the shell of a snail, the creature is able to repair, by degrees, its shattered dwelling. But in spite of the authority of Spallanzani and Voltaire, we have no faith in the power of reproduction of a second head. Valmont de Bomare, after decapitating fifteen hundred, decided that the opinion was erroneous; and, unwilling to suppose that two such great authorities had imposed on public credulity, concludes that in their reluctance to the task, they merely cut off the nose and ears of the sensitive snails without effecting a positive decapitation. A fact untrue of the snail, however, has been proved as regards several varieties of polypi, which are able to reproduce themselves from fragments of a dismembered polypus. There is one species of polypus susceptible of being completely turned inside out, like a glove, without injury to the vital power!

Turenne, who wrote a Treatise on the nature of snails, may be called the Attila of the species, since he admits having decapitated thousands and thousands. He even affects compunction on the subject, after the example of the Greek physician, Herophilus, who [Pg 49] dissected seven hundred bodies in illustration of his anatomical lectures in the theatre of Alexandria. Turenne asserts that, if Valmont de Bomare and Adanson found no renovation of head in the snails they decapitated, it was because they failed to supply their victims with the food which snails are organized to imbibe through the pores of their bodies by crawling over vegetable matter, even when deprived of their heads. He declares that a period of two years is indispensable for the reproduction of a head.

The discoveries of modern navigators have unquestionably added to our menageries a vast variety of animals unknown to the ancients, or known only by hearsay, and esteemed apocryphal. But, on the other hand, various animals with which the ancients pretended to be familiar have wholly disappeared; such as sphinxes and griffins, the phœnix, the salamander, the unicorn, besides many-headed serpents and dragons, which we now abandon to the emblazonment of heraldry.

The most famous dragons of antiquity were those which drew through the air the car of Medea. The philosophic Possidonius—who made war so valiantly against the gout, which he maintains to be no evil—speaks of a dragon which covered an acre of ground; and could swallow a knight on horseback with as much ease as the whale did Jonas. This was, however, an insignificant reptile compared with the one discovered in India by St. Maximus, [Pg 50] Archbishop of Tyre, which covered five acres of ground.

Both in sacred and profane history, dragons have honourable mention. Cadmus is related to have destroyed a dragon; the garden of the Hesperides was guarded by a dragon; St. George triumphed over a dragon; and the Dragon of Wantley has become proverbial in English song. St. Augustin, Bishop of Hippona, speaks with authority of the existence of dragons; describing them as winged serpents which conceal themselves in caverns during the day-time, though they occasionally venture forth and rise into the air. From this it was inferred, by early naturalists, that the dragon of the ancients was one of the larger serpent tribes, having a cartilaginous substance similar to the wings of the bat, or flying-fish, attached to its body.

Suetonius declares that the Emperor Tiberius possessed a pet dragon, which was completely tame and used to eat out of his hand; probably an iguano, the sort of lizard which forms a luxurious object of food in the West Indies; and which, though perfectly harmless, has a frightful appearance. Crinitus records that, in the time of the Emperor Maurice, there was an inundation of the Tiber, which left behind it, on the land, an enormous dragon. The same writer mentions that the Emperor Augustus kept a prodigious dragon in his palace, which he used to lead about with a string. A constellation serves to attest the existence of the dragon [Pg 51] of Lernia.

The tame dragon of the imperial palace was probably a tame boa-constrictor similar to the one formerly kept in the library of the late Sir Joseph Banks.

Various are the records in ancient authors of prodigious serpents. Pliny declares that, in Africa, the army of Regulus was kept in check by an enormous serpent; a statement confirmed by Aulus Gellius and other historians, and admitted by Rollin and Bossuet in their Histoire universelle, and Histoire ancienne. Follard refutes it in his Commentary on Polybius; conceiving the fact of a serpent of one hundred and twenty feet keeping at bay a large army and its engines of war to be an insult to the prowess of the Roman warriors. The following is the opinion the celebrated Lacépède on this subject.

“Travellers who have penetrated into the interior of Africa,” says he, “give an account of prodigious serpents, who advance among the bushes and towering reeds of some vast jungle, like a huge beam suddenly endowed with motion. Herds of gazelles and other timid animals take flight on their approach; nor can iron penetrate the skin of the monster, which is, indeed, appalling when extended to its utmost length, and ravenous after food. The only chance of its extermination is by setting fire to the nearest bushes of the jungle; and thus [Pg 52] raising, as it were, a rampart of fire between you and the gigantic reptile.

“Such, probably, was the serpent which arrested the progress of the Roman army on the coast of Africa. To compute its length at one hundred and twenty feet, after Pliny, would probably be an exaggeration; but the Roman naturalist adds that its skin remained some time suspended, as a trophy, in a temple in Rome. Unless we deny all authenticity to history, therefore, we are bound to believe in the existence of a prodigious serpent, which when irritated by hunger, was known to attack the Roman soldiers; and against which, in the sequel, they had successful recourse to their engines of war.”

In the same manner, a distorted account may hereafter reach posterity of the death of Chuny, the famous elephant, which so long inhabited a menagerie in London; until becoming rabid from the effect of high feeding and long confinement, a party of military was called in to despatch the infuriated animal by a discharge of musketry, which was with some difficulty effected.

To attest the authenticity of the serpent of the time of Regulus, Pliny expressly adds that the tradition is the more credible, because, in former times, the serpents called boas, frequently found in Italy, were of such prodigious size that, during the reign of the Emperor Claudius, [Pg 53] so large a one was found on the Vatican hill, that after its destruction, a child was exhibited entire in its stomach. For many centuries, no boas have been found in Italy; though naturalists accord in asserting them to have existed there in the olden time; just as the kingdom of England, now wholly free from the larger beasts of prey, was formerly overrun with wolves.

St. Isidore of Seville discredits the existence of the Lernian hydra; inferring from its name that hydra only implied some torrent or lake which Hercules effectually confined within banks; thus giving rise to the tradition of his having crushed it with his club. The

traditionary monster, called a gargouille, said to have lived near Rouen, and to have swallowed a prodigious number of victims, is now admitted to have been simply a whirlpool in the Seine, destroyed by an alteration in the banks effected by St. Romain, when Bishop of that See. The anniversary of this event, regarded as the deliverance of the city from a monster, was celebrated at Rouen till the period of the first Revolution; a prisoner being annually delivered by the city on the Festival of St. Romain in honour of the miracle. The gargouille or whirlpool, of Rouen, was but a modern edition of the hydra.

CHAPTER VII.

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THE JEWS.

We have already alluded incidentally to the Jews. But the children of Israel have been too long and too perseveringly an object of persecution to all Christian nations, not to demand a more extended consideration.

Mankind, in the present age, though scarcely less disposed than of old to exercise the tyrannical influence of the strong over the weak, appear to have substituted political for religious animosities; and the war of sects has been converted into the feuds of parties. The days of the fagot and the pile are happily at an end; and instead of martyrs, sacrificed in the name of religion, the victim is forced to exclaim on the scaffold: “Oh, liberty! in thy name, how many crimes are committed!” The number of human victims sacrificed to religious intolerance in the various countries of the world, would, however, afford grounds for a fearful computation.

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The very existence of the Jews may be regarded as among the miracles of the Christian religion. A wandering nation, without King, without country, without secular laws, maintained together only by the strength of a common worship, could never have resisted the persecutions and proscriptions of centuries, but for the intervention of the chastening hand of God. Even in the countries where their existence is the happiest, stigmatized by public detestation, and in highly Catholic nations treated as lepers, as parias, as infected sheep—condemned to the hardest, and most ignominious tasks—beaten, spat upon, despoiled, plundered, tortured, massacred—a prey to the cupidity of the great, and the brutality of the little—such is the history of the Jews from the days of Titus to the present time. Nevertheless, they not only subsist, but flourish, in spite of the universal prejudice against the name; maintaining unchanged, their laws, customs, usages, and even physiognomy. The abhorrence with which they are regarded by other nations, has necessitated intermarriages from generation to generation, which serve to maintain the pure identity of the race.

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The Romans not only detested the Jews for the same motive which produced their hatred of the Christians, namely—the impossibility of converting them to the worship of the false Gods of Paganism, but confounded Jews and Christians together in a common persecution. Yet this equality before the tribunals and executioners of the Emperors and Pro-Consuls of Rome, never availed to diminish the mutual hatred subsisting between them. No amalgamation was possible between them, even amid the flames of a funeral pile. Nero, on one occasion, attempted to illuminate Rome by means of Jews steeped in resinous matter, and thus committed to the flames.

No sooner had the Christians obtained supreme power, than they began, in their turn, to inflict upon the remnant of Israel all the persecutions they had themselves sustained at the hands of the Romans. The Jews were compelled to wear a cap surmounted by horns, to show that they were pre-destined to eternal punishment; and in a Council held at the Lateran, at the commencement of the thirteenth century, they were forced to adopt for robes, stuff of a yellow colour, bearing the representation of a wheel or rack. During Passion Week, and at Easter, it was lawful to attack them with any degree of ferocity. In many cities, it was the custom to inflict corporeal punishment on a Jew publicly, every Good Friday, before the great door of the Cathedral; in some, a positive crucifixion took place!

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Eight times have the Jews been driven out of France. Dagobert enjoined them to embrace Christianity, on pain of banishment; Robert the Pious issued the same edict; Philip Augustus, after crucifying several at Bray sur Seine, caused all their synagogues to be burned, seized their possessions, released their creditors, appropriated to himself a fifth of their substance, and the remainder to landholders of adjoining estates. Philippe le Bel dismissed them the kingdom, leaving them only the funds indispensable for the journey. Nevertheless they returned, to be again exiled by Charles VI. Under Louis XIII, was issued a new edict of banishment. It was only under Louis XVI, one of the most humane of Kings, that the Jews were restored to rights of citizenship in France. Nor was their condition better, at the same epochs, in Great Britain and other adjacent countries.

A singular chance directed the attention of Napoleon to the condition of the Jews. A representation of Racine's "Esther" was given one night at the Opera for a benefit; and the following morning, Talma happening to breakfast with the Emperor, the conversation turned on the performance of the night before. As they were discussing the character of Mardochée, Champagny, afterwards Duc de Cadore, made his appearance, who was at that time Minister of the Interior. Napoleon instantly began interrogating him concerning the position and resources of the Jews in France; and desired that a report might be drawn up on the subject, and speedily submitted to him.

Champagny lost no time in obeying; and the results of this accidental circumstance was the [Pg 58] removal of the civil disabilities of the Jews.

The prejudice, however, attached for so many years to the remnant of Israel, is far from extirpated; and though in more than one country of Europe, the honours of chivalry have been bestowed upon wealthy Jews, influential in the financial operations of the kingdom, and consequently in its politics, the popular feeling against them is unchanged. It is even carried to a most unreasonable degree; and the Jews are reproached with the very pursuits and professions forced upon their adoption by Christian persecution. Commercial speculations were of course the sole resource of a people without country, and without protection; and though we are indebted to them for the useful financial substitute of bills of exchange, we use the name of Jew almost synonymously with that of extortioner, without regard to their commercial importance and utility.

The emancipation accorded them in France, was given chiefly for considerations developed ten years before by Monsieur de Clermont Tonnerre, and other celebrated orators before the National Assembly.

"The Code of Moses," argued they, "is conceived in a twofold spirit—a religious, and a legislative. The political laws which it contains, have ceased to be important—being only applicable to a nation nationally combined and organized; whereas the Jews are a scattered [Pg 59] and wandering tribe, rather than a nation. The religious laws are a case of conscience; serving to enlighten the spirit, and guide the social morality of the children of Israel. From the period of the destruction of the Temple, the Jews have politically ceased to exist; and these religious laws may be said to operate in France, upon Frenchmen of the Jewish persuasion; in Poland, upon Poles of the Jewish persuasion; in Germany, upon Germans of the Jewish persuasion, and so forth."

Upon this showing, civil rights were conceded to them in France, on condition of their contributing their quota to the maintenance of the laws and Government of the country in which they were naturalized.

Till this epoch, a prejudice had prevailed in France that it was an article of faith and duty among the Jews, to deceive and defraud a Christian whenever it lay in their power; and that they were bound, from the moment of their birth, by the Jewish law, to a strong animosity towards us Christian people. Horrible rumours have been revived, at different times, in different countries, of secret sacrifices of the Jews, in which the blood of a Christian was a necessary component.

These questions were openly met and discussed in a manly and temperate manner, in the great Sanhedrim, composed of the highest and most enlightened Jewish authorities; when a [Pg 60] peremptory denial was established to all these injurious charges. Prejudices nearly as absurd, and quite as groundless formerly existed in England against the Catholics; the removal of their civil disabilities being equally the result of the progress of public enlightenment.

As regards the question of usury so often imputed to the Jews, experience has proved of late years, that the most notorious extortioners of this description are of the Christian faith; and it is a question of ethics to inquire whether there be greater turpitude in openly demanding an interest of thirty per cent for a loan of money, or in obtaining the same profit by sale or barter of commodities. A considerable number of tradesmen who pride themselves upon their strict integrity, require a much higher ratio of profit than the per centage of the money-lending Jews; nor is it necessary to remind the reader that some of the most eminent bankers in Europe, renowned equally for their probity and liberality, are of the Jewish persuasion.

CHAPTER VIII. [Pg 61]

VERBAL DELICACY.

There are certain words which appear to offend public delicacy more than the very objects they designate; till it might almost be inferred that all the sensitiveness of human nature had

concentrated itself in the ear. The study of ancient and modern languages will attest the truth of this assertion; for many things are to be learned in a vocabulary besides the idiom it pretends to teach.

The stern Romans, for instance, who affected so stoical a disregard of death, would not allow the word to be pronounced in their presence; though the lives of their children was by the law placed at their mercy. Their sense of delicacy would have been offended had it been mentioned before them that such a one was “dead.” It was necessary to say, “he hath lived.” In the noble defence of Milo, by Cicero, he dared not qualify by the appropriate word the act of assassination committed by the slaves of his client; but declared by periphrasis that under [Pg 62] these circumstances, “the slaves of Milo did what it became them to do.”

To the title of King, the Romans had vowed an eternal hatred, created by the traditionary opprobrium of the Tarquins, and their contempt of the innumerable Kings subjected to their arms, and dragged behind their triumphal cars. But when Cæsar proclaimed himself Emperor, and assumed a more sovereign power than the history of nations had as yet recorded, the Roman people applauded the kingly office presented to them under any other than the name abhorred. The same circumstance occurred in France at the commencement of the present century. The French, after devoting themselves to the extermination of Kings, hailed with delight the coronation of an Emperor; though to proclaim himself “King” would have ensured the premature downfall of Napoleon.

Of late years, the ears of the world have become more than ever chaste and refined; and certain words freely used by Shakspeare, in presence of the Court of the Virgin Queen, and by Molière, in presence of that of the most dignified of European monarchs, are now utterly proscribed, and expunged from the modern stage. The fluctuations of opinion on these points, are highly diverting. Dean Swift relates that, in his early days, the word “whiskers” could not be mentioned in a lady’s presence; a fact we should be inclined to class among the [Pg 63] ingenious fictions of the Dean of St. Patrick; but that at the present day, that rational nation, the Americans, have not courage to pronounce the word leg, even in talking of the limb of a table or of a partridge. The false delicacy of the English takes refuge in a foreign language. All such articles of dress or furniture as are held of a nature unmentionable to ears polite, are named in French; as if the word *chemise* were a less explicit designation of an indispensable under garment than the matter of fact word shift! All this is contemptible hyprocrisy, and a silly compromise with common sense. Such an abbreviation as crim. con. conveys fully as indelicate an allusion as the same words written and pronounced in full.

The author of the School for Scandal objected to so great a variety of words as coarse and indelicate from female lips, that there sometimes existed a difficulty in narrating to him the ordinary events of life.

On the other hand, it is surprising how much may be effected by a change of name with those whose ears are more impressionable than their understanding. The French had signified pretty loudly at the revolution their national opposition to a conscription, and to the *droits réunis*. Against these exercises of administrative tyranny, they were prepared to break [Pg 64] into rebellion. Instead, however, of arguing with their pertinacity, the Government wisely applauded it; substituting for a conscription, the recruiting system, and for the *droits réunis* the *contributions indirectes*. We should be glad if any one would point out to us what was changed in these two important departments of public service, besides the name? This paltering, in a double sense, reminds us of the story of a Frenchman, who was examining a library with persons more enlightened than himself. “Ah! there are the works of my friend, Cicero,” cried he. “*Cicéron, c’est le même que Marc-Tulle.*”

CHAPTER IX. [Pg 65]

AEROLITES AND MIRACULOUS SHOWERS.

The fall of aërolites, often termed by the vulgar a shower of stones, is either more frequent than in days of yore, or attracts more general attention.

The record of similar phenomena has, however, been handed down to us by the ancients; for we are told of a shower of stones which, in the days of Tullus Hostilius, fell upon the city immediately after the ruin of Alba.

“While the Senate was occupied in its deliberations,” says Livy, “a shower of stones fell from Heaven upon the Alban Mount. The Prince, astonished at the report of such a phenomenon, sent to ascertain the truth, and found that a shower of pebbles had really fallen, similar to hailstones.”

Before the time of the Romans, the Greeks had witnessed similar phenomena. In the Thracian Chersonesus there fell a huge greyish stone, which excited the greatest

consternation.

A stone existed in Rome known as the stone of the Mother of the Gods, which had originally fallen from the sky, like that of the Thracian Chersonesus. It fell at Pessinuntum, in Phrygia, where the priests held it in great veneration. The oracle at Rome having given out that the fortunes of the Republic were secure if it could possess itself of this inestimable treasure, the Senate sent an embassy into Phrygia by Scipio Nasica, who enlarged upon the ties existing between the Phrygians and Romans through Æneas; and skilfully setting forth the power of Rome and the protection she was able to concede to the Pessinuntians, the priests gave up the sacred stone. It was immediately carried in procession to Rome, exposed to public view, and an annual festival instituted in its honour. [Pg 66]

A similar stone, which stood near the Temple of Delphos, was equally venerated, and endowed with a still more marvellous origin; being supposed to issue from the belly of Saturn, the God of the stone eaters. Tradition recorded that Saturn, having swallowed it, and found it difficult of digestion, threw it up again, when it fell in Greece. Upon this point, Pausanias and Nonnus concur with the tradition.

In the sixteenth century, a descent of stones took place on Mount Lebanon, accompanied by a luminous globe. Various other instances might be cited from the ancients; but these may suffice to establish proof of identity between the modern and ancient phenomena. In most instances, they have been supposed to be of divine origin and of ominous nature. Damascius mentions that a physician of his day, named Eusebius, carried one about his person, which conduced greatly to the relief of his patients. [Pg 67]

In the sixteenth century, it is stated that there fell near the Adda, in Italy, nearly twelve hundred stones, one of which weighed one hundred, and another sixty pounds. True is it that Cardan makes the assertion, which is therefore doubtful. But Gassendi, who is deserving of credit, states that on the 27th of November, 1627, with a clear atmosphere, at ten A.M., he saw a luminous stone, about four feet in diameter, descend from Heaven upon Mount Vaisian. It was enveloped in a luminous circle of various colours, and passed at a hundred paces from two men, who estimated its elevation at thirty-six feet. It gave out a hissing noise like a rocket, accompanied with a smell of sulphur, and fell two hundred feet from the spectators, plunging itself three feet into the soil. It was of a metallic hue, and weighed fifty-four pounds; and is still to be seen at Aix, in Provence. The largest ever known, fell at Ensisheim, in Alsace, in 1492; its weight being near three hundred pounds. In the Abbé Richard's Natural History of the Air, there is a description of a fall of stones which took place in 1768, in Maine; from which we extract the following passage: [Pg 68]

"During a hurricane that took place near the Château of Lucé, in the Province of Maine, a clap of thunder was heard, followed by a noise similar to the roar of a wild beast; which was audible for many leagues round. Some persons in the parish of Périgné thought they perceived a dense body fall with great velocity into a meadow near the high road to Mans; and on hurrying to the spot, found the stone imbedded in the ground. At first, it was hot; but soon cooling, they were enabled to examine it at leisure. It weighed seven pounds and a half, and was in form triangular; or rather it had three protuberances, of which the one plunged in the earth was grey, and the two others black. A fragment being submitted to the examination of the Royal Academy of Sciences, for analysis, they pronounced it neither to originate in thunder, nor to have fallen from the skies, nor to be composed of mineral particles fused by the action of the electric fluid; but a species of pyrites, giving out a smell of sulphur during its solution. One hundred grains of this substance yielded, upon analysis, eight grains and a half of sulphur, thirty-six of iron, and fifty-five and a half of vitrifiable earth." The evidence of science, however, seldom reaches the ear of the vulgar; and it would be difficult to persuade the populace that aërolites do not fall from the sky. [Pg 69]

Aristotle, in mentioning the stone that fell in Thrace, rejects the idea of its coming from the heavens; and Pliny confesses that most naturalists are of the same opinion. This was a step towards the extinction of a popular error. Fréret denies the existence of atmospheric stones, and declares them to be volcanic emissions driven by the force of the winds. He supposes Mount Albano to have been formerly a volcano; and that the stones that fell must have issued from a re-opening of the crater. Falconet, the sculptor, wrote a volume to prove that Pliny was in error concerning atmospheric stones. While the learned world was thus at variance, the multitude was justified in asserting them to fall from the moon, since men of science were unable to prove the contrary.

On the 26th of April, 1803, there fell a vast number of atmospheric stones at Aigle, in the department of Orne. The peasants of the place, thinking it was the end of the world, fell on their knees invoking divine mercy; and even their betters shared their alarm. This phenomenon happened most opportunely, as the world of science, both in Paris and London, was just then discussing similar occurrences which had taken place in India and Provence; and after most diligent inquiry, the Institute resolved to despatch one of its members to the spot. Monsieur Biot, an enthusiast in the cause of science, arrived on the spot on the 16th of July, and collected the following facts. [Pg 70]

"About one o'clock, P.M., the sky being calm, with only a few greyish clouds above the horizon, which did not diminish the fineness of the weather, a luminous globe was seen, from Caen, from Pont Audemer, from the vicinity of Alençon, Falaise, and Verneuil, rushing with great velocity through the atmosphere; and immediately afterwards, a violent explosion

was heard at Aigle and thirty leagues round; lasting six minutes, and resembling a discharge of artillery followed by that of musketry, and terminating as with a roll of drums.

“A small cloud of rectangular form seemed to have been the origin of all this terrible noise; the broader side of which was towards the west. It appeared to be motionless throughout the phenomenon; vapours being emitted after each discharge. The cloud was very high in the air. The inhabitants of two villages, situated a league asunder, perceived it as if exactly suspended above their heads. A hissing noise, similar to a stone hurled from a sling, was heard wherever it hovered; and at the same time, numerous solid bodies fell, which being collected, proved to be meteoric stones.

“When tested, they were found to contain sulphur, iron in the metallic state, magnesia and nickel; which, in the mineral kingdom have no analogy.” [Pg 71]

Monsieur Biot also stated that the direction of the meteor was precisely that of the magnetic meridian; an important remark, as a guide for future observations. The great point gained in this inquiry, is that the highest order of science, agreeing with the earliest professors, adopts what by progressive science was denied.

The fact of showers of stones being established, all that remains to be proved is their origin. Some still assert that they fall from the moon; others attribute them to volcanos. Neither fact can be proved; and the descent of aërolites at present remains a mystery.

One phenomenon often succeeds another; and shortly after the fall of stones at Aigle, a shower of peas took place in Spain, and the kingdom of Leon. This last phenomenon occurred in the month of May of the same year; and, in Spain, fifteen quintals of an unknown seed were collected after a violent storm; being round in form, white in colour, less than peas in size, and resembling no known seed. They seemed, however, to belong to the leguminous family of plants. Cavanilla, the botanist, analized them without being able to determine their class. These productions, at least, could neither be supposed to come from the moon, nor to have a volcanic origin. Some of the seeds were sown in the Botanic Garden of Madrid, but without result. This is, however, by no means a solitary instance of a miraculous shower. [Pg 72]

Pliny, Livy, Solinus, and Julius Obsequius have recorded showers of blood, milk, wool, money, and pieces of flesh! Those authors make frequent mention of such occurrences; dupes, no doubt, to the traditions of the ancients. Lamothe Levayer, however, surpasses them all, and mentions the fall of a man from the sky. Unless from a balloon, or the scaffolding of some lofty building, we must be permitted to doubt; though he may, perhaps, allude to some individual carried up by the force of a whirlwind; for in the autumn of 1812, on the road to Genoa, a mule was raised up by the wind, sustained during thirty seconds in the air, then disappeared in a ravine, where it probably perished.

If we deny the existence of showers of blood, we must admit that there have been phenomena such as to justify impostors in propagating such delusions. During the Siege of Genoa, in 1774, there fell a red rain upon the suburb of San Pietro d’Arena, which caused much consternation among the inhabitants; the wind having carried up a quantity of red earth, which proved the cause of general alarm. A similar phenomenon took place, near Hermanstadt, in Transylvania.

“On the 17th of May, 1810,” says a German journal, “there was a rain of blood which lasted a quarter of an hour, accompanied by a violent storm, and gusts of wind towards the south-west. Being collected on the spot by a physician, and submitted to the chemical tests of sulphurated nitrous, muriatic acid, acetate of lead, lime water, mercury, and saponaceous spirit, it exhibited neither precipitation, nor loss of colour. Tested with a solution of alum and fixed alkali, the precipitate induced a belief that the colouring matter of this strange rain pertained to the vegetable kingdom. [Pg 73]

To elucidate the mystery of the rain at Hermanstadt, it sufficed to inquire in what point was the wind. For on examining the localities in the southwesterly direction, the hills proved to be clothed with fir, in bloom, and the rain of blood was instantly explained. For in the North of Europe rains of a reddish yellow, impregnated with the bloom of the fir, constantly occur.

In 1608, the walls of Aix in Provence were covered with red spots, which the people conceived to be blood. But Peiresc, a man of profound science, undeceived them by proving them to be the spots left by a species of butterfly on emerging from its crysalis; the number having been immense that year at Aix.

Till balloons and other aërial carriages are used as engines of warfare, we despair of having to record an authentic shower of blood, or any other than common place hail, rain, and snow. There is an instance of a shower of money, or rather of false coinage, mentioned by Dion Cassius; who states that a certain rain turned copper white, assigning to it the hue of silver, which lasted for three days. This is far from miraculous; as it requires only a portion of volatilized mercury to mingle with the rain, as in the instance of the fir bloom, to produce such an effect. [Pg 74]

Showers of milk are explained by cretaceous matter carried into the air by whirlwinds. The shreds of human flesh we read of are the red fragments vomited by volcanoes; while showers of wool consist of the down of certain trees, such as willows and osiers. Showers of

cinders are of course the result of volcanic eruption. The wind conveys them a prodigious distance; for when Herculaneum and Pompeii were imbedded in lava, the ashes fell at Rome, and even in Africa.

About a century ago, the deck of a vessel sailing from Marseilles to Martinique was covered with ashes some inches deep, which were known to proceed from an earthquake in the Island of St. Vincent. No other cause could be assigned, though the vessel was one hundred leagues from the island. The velocity of a cannon-ball or shell has been calculated; but that of the wind, like the origin of the meteoric stones, remains a problem.

CHAPTER X.

[Pg 75]

NOSTRUMS AND SPECIFICS.

The title of “Talisman” might be fairly prefixed to this chapter; but we will content ourselves with the word nostrum. Considering the number of these specifics, and the blind confidence of the world in their efficacy, the credulous must be surprised at the ailments which still afflict humanity. Previous to the introduction of quinine, the ague was supposed to be cured by dipping in three holy waters, in three different churches, on the same Sunday; a difficult remedy for people residing where there is only one church! A variety of charms for the ague are still in popular use.

Unsuccessful gamesters used formerly to make a knot in their linen; of late years they have contented themselves with changing their chair as a remedy against ill-luck. As a security against cowardice, it was once only necessary to wear a pin plucked from the winding sheet of a corpse. To insure a prosperous accouchement to your wife, you had but to tie her girdle [Pg 76] to a bell and ring it three times. To get rid of warts, you were to fold up in a rag as many peas as you had warts, and throw them upon the high road; when the unlucky person who picked them up became your substitute. In the present day, to cure a tooth-ache, you go to your dentist. In the olden time you would have solicited alms in honour of St. Lawrence, and been relieved without cost or pain.

The greater number of these charms or remedies were not resorted to by the multitude alone, but recommended by Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus. In the treaty on superstitions by the learned Curé, Thiers, these remedies are recorded; being about as effective as the talismans of the ancients, including the famed Palladium of Troy.

Rome had faith in celestial bucklers, and the stone of the Mother of the Gods. Virgil was skilled in the composition of talismans; a brazen fly attributed to him attained more celebrity in his time than the immortal “Georgics.” This fly being suspended from one of the gates of Naples, the charm proved so effective, that not a fly entered that city for a space of eight years. A trumpet held by a statue, also invented by Virgil, possessed the power of laying the dust in his garden!

Gregory of Tours mentions that the city of Paris was secured from rats, snakes, and fires, [Pg 77] during a long period by means of a rat, a snake, and dormouse of brass, which were destroyed by the Vandals. Pliny suggests that Milo of Crotona was indebted for his prodigious strength to a talisman, as we know that of Samson to have lain in his hair. The Egyptian warriors wore figures of scarabs, in order to fortify their courage; and Dr. Hufeland informs us that a German army having been defeated by the French in the olden time, talismans were found upon the bodies of the dead and wounded.

Among the first talismans was that mentioned by Suidas as worn by the Kings of Egypt to endow them with the love of justice. Pericles was proud of wearing a talisman presented to him by the Grecian ladies. Macrobus relates that the victors in the public games used to procure themselves little boxes, in which mathematicians had inclosed preservatives against envy; while Thiers informs us that an illustrious astrologer invented a talisman for intercepting the approach of flies to a house; when to his horror, no sooner was it suspended, than a fly, more daring than the rest, deposed a contemptuous mark of disregard upon the charm. The absurdity of these inventions, it is needless to assert; but let us consider the subject of the ancient talismans simply as subjects only of curiosity.

Talismans were cast in metal melted under the influence of a constellation communicating [Pg 78] some specific virtue. Amulets, talismans of a secondary order, but equally efficacious, were formed of plants, figures designed on ivory, metals, or precious stones. Such designs were called “*gamahez*”—whence the word “*cameo*;”—and were preservatives against fever, rheumatism, gout, tooth-ache, paralysis, apoplexy, cold, and other diseases. The Platonists were great champions of amulets and talismans. Gaffard wrote a treatise in assertion of their efficacy, and to defend them against the imputation of magic. Not many years ago, the ladies of Paris used to wear iron rings, manufactured by the celebrated locksmith, Georget, which, like the galvanic rings now in fashion, were considered a guarantee against the

headache. A few uneradicated roots of popular prejudice will always remain to produce a new crop.

How were simple mortals to suppose themselves in error when following such examples as Cato, Varro, and Julius Cæsar? The two first conceived that no evil could overtake them so long as they made use of certain mysterious words; and Cæsar, after falling out of his chariot, would not resume his place till he had recited certain words to which he attributed the virtue of warding off falls.

Father Thiers relates that, in his time, the Benedictines of Germany and France pretended to possess medals which protected them and their cattle from accidents, sorcery, and witchcraft. According to his version, about the year 1647, there was a vigorous crusade against sorcery, and many magicians were executed. At Straubing, several declared, when legally examined, that their maledictions were of no effect upon either the cattle or inhabitants of the Castle of Nattemberg, in which were deposited certain medals of St. Benedict, of which they gave the precise description. A certain number of initials were inscribed upon them, which being filled up with Latin words, signified “Divine cross, guide my steps, banish Satan, cease to tempt me, I know thy poisons, and will eschew them.” No sooner did the monks hear of this discovery than they began casting medals of a peculiar kind, which soon abounded in Germany. [Pg 79]

The French Benedictines became equally zealous; and having struck a similar medal, published that it contained a charm against witchcraft and disease, and was a guarantee against all ailings of man or beast; the former requiring only to carry them in their pockets, the latter suspended bell-fashion from their necks.

Father Thiers so far from accrediting the efficacy of these medals, declares that the French Benedictines ought to be too enlightened to encourage such absurdities. But whether in good or bad faith, certain it is that they made a speculation of trading with the medals. Thiers also treats as impostors the curers of burns, and preventers of fire, who pretend to disregard the danger of fire arms. According to a popular tradition, a burn was cured by saying: “Fire lose thy heat, as Judas did his colour when he betrayed the Lord.” A chimney on fire was extinguished by making three crosses upon the chimney-piece. Any fire was quickly subdued by throwing an egg into the flames, which had been laid on the Thursday, or Friday of Holy Week, during the celebration of divine service. No fire arms availed against a person repeating thrice, “Malatus dives fulgiter regissa,” or wearing a band with a mystical inscription, every letter being separated by a cross. The learned father declares such practices to be absurd, and relates the following anecdote. [Pg 80]

“An old woman of Louvain, who had an affection of the eyes was assured she had only to pronounce a few mysterious words to be cured. She instantly addressed a young scholar of the University, offering to present him with a new coat if he would write the words she dictated to him. The youth consented, and seemed to write as she dictated. But on delivering to her the sealed document, he enjoined her not to open it till she was cured, on which she presented him the new coat and withdrew. Shortly afterwards, her eyes being recovered, she confided her secret to a neighbour suffering from the same affliction; who taking the mysterious paper into her care, received the same benefit. Enchanted by their good fortune, they determined to know the secret, and broke the seal of the document; which was found to contain the following phrase, which the youth had maliciously inserted. ‘May the devil tear out thine eyes, old witch, and fill up the sockets with burning embers.’” [Pg 81]

In the beginning of the last century, there were individuals who professed to have a powder which extinguished fire. This was contained in a barrel, and thrown into the flames. The barrel was in fact double, the external one being full of water, the internal charged with gunpowder sufficient to cause an explosion; and the water so dispersed, of course, extinguished the fire, if inconsiderable. Had the authors of this invention not kept it secret, we might have respected them; for though it produced no great result, an idea though only half conceived may be the forerunner of more important discoveries. Attempts have been made of late years to guarantee thatched roofs against fire, by impregnating them with a preparation of which we know not the composition. The success, though not complete, should not be discouraged; for repeated experiments may be finally successful. Flowers of sulphur are often employed for the extinction of fires in chimnies, possessing properties which render the action of fire less intense. [Pg 82]

However absurd the miraculous virtues attributed to talismans and amulets, in some cases, the security they inspire may be of use to those who have faith in their power. Imagination counts for something in the moral organisation of man; and through the constant action and reaction of the one on the other, the body may be at times advantageously soothed by the serenity conferred on the mind through the influence of the fancy.

CHAPTER XI. [Pg 83]

The world and its inhabitants are still exposed to a variety of grievous afflictions and visitations in spite of the infallible nostrums for preventing them, in general use; which appears surprising when we consider the number of able scientific men constantly devoted to the study of our physical nature, and the plausible novel theories which they every now and then unfold to the world. Let those who devote themselves to the study of physiological science persevere in their researches; which if not valuable to others are at least amusing to themselves. According to the Abbé Cottin's line,

"The pleasure is to learn and not to know."

Between the successive systems of Lavater and Gall, we give the decided preference to the latter; the studies and experiments upon which are founded on principles equally applicable to all human beings, whatever their condition, sex, age, or habits; whether belonging to an [Pg 84] uncultivated or civilised state; while all other systems for promoting the knowledge of human character, gravitate in a sphere more or less exceptional; so that the application could never become general. An eminent magistrate used to pretend that he could capitally convict a man by a sight of his handwriting; and many people affect to pronounce upon the shades and variations of human character on a similar indication.

Considering the number of persons ignorant of the calligraphic art, we almost prefer the system of the barber of Picard, who needed only to shave a man to judge of his disposition!

All the inferential systems that now command our attention were subjects of contemplation to the ancients. Human physiognomy, above all, must have ever presented a subject of powerful interest. It is a daily object of reflection to all men, though unperceived by ourselves. A countenance pleases or displeases us at first sight; yet we know not whether it be beauty that charms, or the want of it that repels us. A face which charms one man, disgusts another. Such a person is said to have a happy countenance, such another, an unhappy one, on which the former may be felicitated, the latter pitied; but it is most unfair to deduce from such evidence the existence of good qualities in the one, or vices and defects in the other. Such, however, is the elementary study of Physiognomy, and such the delusion [Pg 85] which our antipathies often create.

Dimension and proportion first attracted the attention of the philosophers. Aristotle compares a man whose head possesses extraordinary volume to an owl; while Albertus Magnus looks upon him as an idiot; and the physician, Porta, significantly informs us that Vitellius had an immense head. If, on the contrary, a man possess a cerebrum of the usual circumference, but exceeding by a little the volume of ordinary heads, the same authors regard him as a man of superior intelligence, endowed with a noble soul, a brilliant and fertile imagination; and, as an example, adduce the head of Plato which exceeded in proportion the remainder of his body. Alexander the Great had a small head, compared even with his person, which as is well known was diminutive.

The quality and colour of the hair was likewise a subject of speculative theory for the ancients. Lank hair was considered indicative of pusillanimity and cowardice; yet the head of Napoleon was guiltless of a curl! Frizzly hair was thought an indication of coarseness and clumsiness. The hair most in esteem, was that terminating in ringlets. Dares, the historian, states that Achilles and Ajax Telamon had curling locks; such also was the hair of Cymon, the Athenian. As to the Emperor Augustus, nature had favoured him with such redundant [Pg 86] looks, that no hair-dresser in Rome could produce the like. Auburn or light brown hair was thought the most distinguished, as portending intelligence, industry, a peaceful disposition, as well as great susceptibility to the tender passion. Castor and Pollux had brown hair; so also had Menelaus. Black hair does not appear to have been esteemed by the Romans; but red was an object of aversion. Ages before the time of Judas, red hair was thought a mark of reprobation, both in the case of Typhon, who deprived his brother of the sceptre of Egypt, and Nebuchednezzar who acquired it in expiation of his atrocities. Even the donkey tribe suffered from this ill-omened visitation, according to the proverb of "wicked as a red ass." Asses of that colour were held in such detestation among the Copths, that every year they sacrificed one by hurling it from a high wall.

Next in importance to the hair, were the ears; the size and shape of which harmless cartilages, supplied important conjectures. According to Aristotle, large ears are indicative of imbecility; while small ones announce madness. Ears which are flat, point out the rustic and brutal man. Those of the fairest promise, are firm and of middling size. Happy the man who boasts of square ears; a sure indication of sublimity of soul and purity of life. Such, according to Suetonius, were the ears of the Emperor Augustus.

Having considered the conformation of the head, the colour and quality of the hair, and the [Pg 87] shape of the ears, let us treat of the complexion; of which the most unfavourable is the yellow, livid, or leaden, like those of Caligula, Attila, and the most notorious tyrants of the olden time. The eyes should neither be too large nor too little; the first announcing laziness, like those of the ox. Such were the eyes of Domitian, the vainest, most inert, and cowardly of men. Upon this point, Aristotle is at complete variance with Homer; who is so enraptured with large eyes, that, in order to define the beauty of those of Juno, he names her *Boopis* or "ox-eyed." Neither large nor small eyes afford proof of intellect; and no person who is not

afflicted with squinting has any right to complain.

It is usual to consider large eyes the finest, a prejudice so universal, that it is commonly said, “She is ugly, certainly; but then she has such fine eyes!”—or, “She is a pretty woman; but her eyes are too small.” Whereas neither form nor dimension constitutes the beauty or influence of eyes; but rather their expression. The colour of eyes is a mere matter of taste; though Aristotle asserts that persons gifted with almond shaped blue eyes, are frank and intelligent; with brown, clever and good; with green, courageous and enterprising. As to black eyes, Aristotle pronounces them to be the sure prognostics of timidity and [Pg 88] pusillanimity. Red eyes are indicative of bad temper. The gossips of France have quite as good a theory as that of Aristotle; viz: that “Les yeux bleus vont aux cieux; les yeux gris, en Paradis; les yeux noirs, en purgatoire, les yeux verts, en enfer!”

Bushy eyebrows are indicative of a brutal obstinate and impious character; long eyebrows, of arrogance, and insolence; spare eyebrows, of effeminacy and cowardice. But if they are thick, flexible, and parallel, you may rely on a sound judgment and superior wisdom. Such are ever the brows of Jupiter; attesting the theory of Aristotle.

The question of noses occupies a prominent place in theories of the human physiognomy. The flat nose is indicative of a propensity to pleasure and luxury; the pointed, of ill-temper and frivolity; a deviation from the straight line, of a disposition to malice and repartee. Since the days of Aristotle, this opinion has been permanent; a crooked nose, being the attribute of a satirical mind. The owner of a diminutive nose, is usually cunning and dissimulating; of a large nose, imprudent and discourteous.

Let us here observe, that if there be one feature in the human face more characteristic than another, it is the nose. Examine the head of a skeleton which exhibits trace of human features, save the nasal bone; which though prominent, is an integral part of the cerebral [Pg 89] globe. Now if the brain be the seat of intelligence, may not the nose be influenced by its propinquity to the brain? Humbly submitting this question to the consideration of science, we proceed to consider the theories of other speculators.

Amongst Europeans, the Italians rank first for beauty of nose; the Dutch, for the excessive ugliness of that feature. The English nose is apt to be thick and cartilaginous; that of the Jews, somewhat crooked. In France, almost every man of genius has had a well-formed nose. Short and flat noses, so censured by Aristotle, still rank low in the science of physiognomy. Socrates, however, was a singular instance of a hideous nose. Boerhaave and Gibbon possessed one of the same disagreeable form.

The mouth attracted the notice of the ancients as much as the nose. A moderate mouth was, in their estimation, a symbol of courage, capacity, and nobleness of heart. The indication indeed was infallible when accompanied with a square and well-formed chin, an expansive forehead, and firm and rosy cheeks. The Greeks did not confine their observations to the head and face in forming a judgment of the moral and intellectual faculties; but regarded every component part of the human frame. Since, however, we are more discreetly clothed than the Greeks, we decline following their researches. The eyelids, nails, moles, and even teeth, were taken into consideration: more especially the latter, as indicative of the workings [Pg 90] of the mind. If authentic, the science of physiognomy would be universally studied, for how useful would it be to detect the good or evil qualities of man or woman by a glance at their faces! As it stands at present, however, many false inferences would be made. For instance, we are told that well shaped blue eyes, portend intelligence and frankness; qualities incompatible with a sound nose. But if found together, as is often the case, what is to be decided between two positive contradictions, the nose rendering impossible the virtues promised by the eyes? The indications of the mouth and eyebrows may be equally at variance; and physiognomy presents a tissue of similar contradictions.

Having established the fallacy of the physiognomical system, we must nevertheless render homage to the sagacity of Lavater, to his ingenious and fascinating system, and conscientious enthusiasm for an art which he has enriched with much valuable observations, and endeavoured to elevate into a science. Lavater was sincerely devoted to his art, which predominated over every other idea, and exalted his imagination to such a degree, that he became rather the poet than the disciple of physiognomy. Gifted with a highly impressionable nature, the countenances of certain persons used to haunt his memory; and in early life, he made such striking inferences from certain physiognomies, that he was [Pg 91] induced to persist in his studies.

“My first attempts,” said he, “were pitiful. Required to furnish a discourse to the Society of Sciences at Zurich, I decided upon the theme of physiognomy, and composed it with heedlessness and precipitation.

“I was censured, praised, and laughed at; and could not refrain from smiling, well aware how much of this was undeserved. At this moment, my physiognomical convictions are so strong that I decide upon certain faces with as absolute a certainty as of my existence.”

The sincerity of Lavater is undeniable. But even had we his convictions, we should hesitate to decide in favour of the infallibility or applicability of his system; which is more the result of a peculiar personal sagacity, constantly on the watch, than the efficacy of the art. A man may be born a physiognomist. But to become one by mere force of study, is next to

impossible.

Zopirus was doubtless a great physiognomist. One day, on entering the school of Socrates, he pronounced, at a glance, a man who was present to be extremely vicious; and his conjecture was correct. But such sweeping applications of the art of physiognomy would sanction calumny, by allowing the accidents of nature to be made a test of character; when [Pg 92] the influence of religion, reason, or education might have successfully subdued them. Were such a verdict held good, a fatal impediment would be placed against all moral improvement. Refinement of intellect is often connected with a coarse exterior; and the most prepossessing physiognomy with the grossest violations of decency. “A pretty woman deficient in sense,” says Madame de Staël, “is a flower without fragrance;” and how many scentless flowers of this kind are to be met with in society!—The face of the esteemed La Fontaine was that of an idiot. Jean Jacques Rousseau was remarkable for a stupid serenity of countenance, wholly at variance with the impetuous and volcanic nature of his mind. The face of Fénélon was devoid of all expression. I have heard of two brothers, one possessing a charming countenance, and yet a rascal; the other, a villainous face, yet a perfectly honest man. Moreover, our features are constantly varying; and if our moral and intellectual faculties are to be inferred from these changes, how are we to establish or follow up any fixed principle, amid such a labyrinth of confusion? A system based upon the general development of the brain is far more rational; because the lobes of the brain are born with us, and if time develop them, it is in manifest proportions.

We admit, therefore, the talents of certain individuals for pronouncing upon the characters of men, according to their physiognomy; and that they may, by constant practice, enhance [Pg 93] this personal aptitude. Individuals educated for a diplomatic career, ought not to neglect this study, proficiency in which is essential to their success. To divine, yet never be divined; to read the physiognomy of others, while your own is devoid of expression, formed one of the grand secrets of Monsieur de Talleyrand. Most people who converse with a multiplicity of persons become physiognomists; and if mistaken in their judgments, are less often so than those who have intercourse with few. But the civilized man is so different from the being pure from the hands of his Creator, that any system comprising confusedly the state of nature and of civilization must necessarily be fallacious.

Study Lavater, therefore, and practice his art as a recreation among friends; but make no serious conclusions drawn from physiognomical rules, which abound in contradictions.

Let us now proceed to point out the similitudes of feature betwixt certain men and certain animals. Though we were created after the image of God, many theorists establish physiognomical analogies between man and the animal race. These speculators pretend that every human being had his correspondent beast in this world; just as every good Christian has his patron among the elect of Paradise. Charles Lebrun, the favourite painter of Louis XIV, was a zealous adherent to this theory. Before his time, Porta had devoted his attention [Pg 94] to this ancient supposition; and congratulated himself upon having detected a likeness between the face of a setter and that of the divine Plato; an idea which prompted further speculation. That a painter continually watching nature under every aspect should be allured by such a theory, in which his practised eye has compared and approximated objects, and detected similitudes unintelligible to the vulgar, cannot be surprising. A mere hint, or trace suffices him for the composition of a face, just as Cuvier recomposed the Mastodon by merely seeing one of the bones.

After profound studies, Charles Lebrun concluded that every human face had features more or less correspondant with those of the various animal species. His opinion rested upon a diagram, uniting a quantity of designs with an explanatory text. The designs still exist, but the text is not forthcoming; though something is known of it by means of one of his pupils who survived him. Lebrun could distinguish by a glance at an animal’s head, whether it were carnivorous, or herbivorous, timid, or bold, peaceful, or ferocious. To the bump on the higher part of the nose, he assigned the locality of courage. To ascertain this endowment, either in man or animals, therefore, you had only to cast an eye on the nose. “All men of eminence,” said he, “have well proportioned noses, of which the aquiline has ever been esteemed the most distinguished; probably from its similitude to the beak of the king of the [Pg 95] air—the eagle. The Persians esteemed the aquiline nose so highly, that supreme power was inaccessible without it. Cyrus, Artaxerxes, and every monarch who ever swayed the eastern world, boasted of this mark of distinction.

Like all new theories, the paradoxes of Lebrun commanded much attention, presenting a subject of inexhaustible controversy, as coming within the scope of every one’s observation. According to the system of Lebrun, the Great Condé enjoyed the distinction of possessing the most heroic nose in the kingdom, which, of course, brought the system into credit. Examine the designs of Lebrun. The analogy between certain men and animals there portrayed, is most striking. But the skill of a clever artist contrives and exaggerates resemblances, like the wit of the caricaturist, whose monstrosities, however absurd, often exhibit a remarkable degree of likeness.

As regards mere physical analogy, nothing can be cleverer than the works of Grandville, whose animals seem to emulate our absurdities, habits, and manners. But Lebrun and his disciples looked upon the thing seriously; instituting pernicious deductions from certain accidents of form, and tending to approximate enlightened man to the brute creation. The

materialism thus inculcated, would lead to the most serious moral results.

CHAPTER XII.

[Pg 96]

LAST WORDS OF DYING PERSONS.

Are the last words of the dying to be considered prophetic? Is a supernatural intelligence vouchsafed to the last efforts of expiring nature? Examples are cited in substantiation of this belief; but the subject is one demanding the most serious consideration. Napoleon was of opinion that Hannibal was the greatest warrior of antiquity; founding his opinion upon the fact that the Roman historians, in describing his character, must have rather disparaged than aggrandised the great enemy of Rome. This luminous appreciation acquires to be constantly kept in view. Every historian is more or less biassed with regard to the personages he describes. He relates events after their accomplishment, and occasionally miraculous incidents to enhance the value of his recital.

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The words spoken on death-beds may have been accidentally realized; as often occurs to the prophesies of the living. But this does not confer the gift of prophecy upon every death-bed.

Ferdinand IV., King of Castille, having been cited by one of his victims to appear in the presence of God; died on the thirtieth day. But the most remarkable summons of this nature was that made by Jacques Molay, Grand Master of the Templars, to Philip le Bel and Clement V., to appear in the presence of God forty days before the end of the year. At the time specified, Clement was carried to the tomb; but Philip did not follow him until a year later, 1314, the martyrdom of the Templars having taken place in 1312. It is true that Ferdinand IV. condemned to death the Brothers Carvajal, unjustly accused of the murder of a Spanish gentleman; and that their citation to the King in their dying moments was accomplished to a day. But the health of the monarch was, at the time of their condemnation, much impaired by the excesses of the table; so that his approaching end seemed certain. As we observed respecting talismans, some imaginations are worked upon by encouragement, while others are affected in the contrary sense; and it needed no miracle for the menace of the Carvajals to hasten the end of the King of Castille.

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Sometimes a careless word or sentence acquires, by accident, a semblance of importance. At the death of Louis XV., all France recalled to mind the words the Bishop of Senez had pronounced before him: “In forty days, Nineveh shall be destroyed.” Louis XV. died on the fortieth day, and the Bishop was thought a prophet; a mere figure of eloquence having become metamorphosed into a prediction.

Much such a prophecy was uttered in the Church of Notre Dame, by a priest named Beauregard, some years previous to the Revolution. “Thy temples Lord,” said he, “shall be thrown down and pillaged, thy name blasphemed, thy rites proscribed. Great God! what do I hear! The holy canticles with which these vaults once echoed, are drowned by profane and lascivious songs; and the infamous divinities of paganism usurp the place of God, the Creator, sitting on the throne of the Holy of Holies, and receiving the sacred incense of our altars.”

These words became remarkable when realized at the Revolution. But when they were uttered, the Revolution was already impending. Beauregard, endowed with a zealous and vehement nature, touched upon the probable consequence of a philosophy which he contemplated with horror; thus becoming an unconscious refutation of the proverb, that “No man is a prophet in his own country.”

CHAPTER XIII.

[Pg 99]

THE ANTIPODES—MORNING AND EVENING DEW.

It is a gratifying thing when popular prejudices are overcome by the progress of public enlightenment. The existence of the antipodes was formerly disbelieved. Before the spherical form of our globe was ascertained, how was it possible to suppose that there existed human beings under our feet standing with their head downwards?

Till the Newtonian theory was developed, it seemed impossible but that persons so placed must fall into the realms of endless space. There is a general disposition in human nature to

believe all that is impossible as well as to doubt every thing that really exists; and such was the incredulity of the world with regard to the antipodes.

The ancients, who admitted many absurdities, denied the existence of the antipodes. The Fathers of the Church followed in their steps; some indeed pronounced it heresy to hold such a belief. St. Augustin expressly says, “Take heed lest thou believe such a fable.” In his [Pg 100] treatise on the Acts of the Apostles, there is an argument remarkable enough, considering that the rotundity of the earth was then unknown. “Faith teaches us, that all men are from Adam. But if there were other men under the earth, they could not be of Adam. How could they have found their way to the antipodes? Not by land, for the antipodes are cut off from our hemisphere by boundless seas. Not by sea; for the most experienced pilot would not dare launch his vessel in such boundless space. It is, therefore, evident that the doctrine of the antipodes is false and heretical.” Time and experience have taught us the folly of deciding upon topics exceeding our comprehension. Yet, perhaps, even now we deny a host of truths, which at some time may give us an insight into futurity. In great as well as trifling things, every day brings its tribute to the cause of truth. The antipodes are admitted to exist. The earth revolves round the sun, though once supposed to be stationary in its place in the heavens; while the dew, which our ancestors believed to descend from heaven, is known to be an emanation from the earth.”

Such an error was pardonable enough. The dews are often made use of in Holy Writ as a term of comparison; and the mercy of the Lord is implored to descend upon his people like the dews from heaven. After many experiments in elucidation of the origin of dew, a [Pg 101] scientific observer obtained the following results.

Having placed some plants under glass bells, he examined them the following morning, and finding them to be covered with dew like those left in the air, he cut shreds of flannel; and placing them at graduated heights, found that those nearest the earth were first wet, and that the dew gradually rose towards the highest. Upon weighing the shreds, he found those below to be the most saturated. Lastly, upon examining plants grown in green-houses, he felt convinced that they also imbibed abundant dew. These experiments excited attention; and Muschembroek, the author, had many imitators. Among others, Dufay, who placed a double ladder thirty-two feet high, in the centre of a garden, suspending tablets of glass at different altitudes; so that each was equally exposed to the action of the atmosphere. He remained at the foot of the ladder to watch the progress of the phenomenon, and found that the tablets nearest the earth were the first moist, and that the humidity ascended gradually to the highest. Several other men of science repeated the same experiment with similar results.

The problem was thus solved, and proof obtained that dew ascended from the earth. To the joy, however, of some, a doubt presented itself. By renewed experiments it was found that this dew from the earth did not equally affect all bodies, and was partial in its bearing. For [Pg 102] instance, it appeared to avoid gold, silver, metal, and polished marbles; while it adhered to glass, oily and resinous substances.

Place a gold or plated vessel under a crystal vase in a garden during the night, and in the morning you will find the edges perfectly dry, while the crystal vase will be wet. The cause of this difference is not accounted for. Reaumur supposes, but does not affirm, that the golden vessel, containing more caloric than the crystal, repels the dew, while the latter attracts it.

In confirmation of this supposition, Reaumur proposed the following experiment. Place a china cup upon a stone within a hot-bed; and further on, and beyond the influence of the hot-bed, another cup of similar form, substance, and diameter; this will be charged with dew, the other will remain dry. In explanation of this difference, it may be imagined that the phenomenon of which they sought the solution, originated in electricity; an opinion, however, which has no influence over the main discovery that dews arise from the ground, instead of falling from the skies, as asserted by the mythology of the ancients, and the tropes of Scripture.

CHAPTER XIV. [Pg 103]

PERPETUAL LAMPS AND ARCHIMEDES.

Stability is not the characteristic of man or his works. The discovery of perpetual motion has long been the object of our ambition; the sole approach to which appears to be our futile perseverance in the pursuit. Let us be content, therefore, with aspiring to duration, a sufficient triumph for perishable man; and be it noted that this quality, though impressed by human art upon inert matter, such as the Pyramids of Egypt, is incompatible with the mutability of our social institutions.

The word perpetual has been too often and too easily applied. The marvellous is too often substituted for the true, just as great vices are more widely apparent than great virtues. Who has not heard, for instance, of perpetual lamps, miraculous as the Wonderful Lamp of the Arabian Tales!

The Pagan priesthood originated these fabulous sepulchral lights; and those of our own faith [Pg 104] who had the weakness to adopt their deception, endangered our confidence by recourse to unworthy trickeries. Pausanias mentions a lamp of massive gold, consecrated by Callimachus, and endowed with such properties as to endure a year without deterioration. Another is said to have existed in a temple in England. Pope Gelasius affirms, in the acts of St. Sylvester, that in the Baptistery of Rome, there was a lamp which had burned without intermission since the reign of Constantine, viz., half a century. That the dark ages should have admitted such marvels is not surprising. But one of the illuminati of the sixteenth century, Fortunio Liceti, composed a treaty concerning the existence of such lamps, asserting that, upon opening the tomb of the giant Pallas, a lamp was found which had been burning since the times of the pious Æneas. Another was stated to have been found in the tomb of Tullia, during the Pontificate of Paulinus, about fifteen centuries and a half after its construction. In the reign of Justinian, a portrait of our Saviour was discovered at Edessa with a lamp unrenovated from the period of the Christian era, that is, during a period of five centuries. Fortunio cites a vast number of similar examples; from which he infers that the Romans possessed the secret of making inextinguishable lamps. His conviction upon the [Pg 105] subject is such, that he attempts to explain the possibility by a theory that the combustion of the smoke produced fresh oil for the nourishment of the lamp. This must surely have been the far-famed oil of the Phœnix.

It is scarcely worth while to controvert such absurdities; the fable of perpetual lamps having faded before the dawning light of reason. Is it, however, to be credited, that the genius of Descartes did not secure him against this vulgar error? The views of that great man on the subject deserve to be quoted as a proof of the aberrations to which superior minds are subject. “After considering the fire produced by gunpowder,” says Descartes, “which is the most transitory in existence, let us inquire whether there can exist a flame, enduring without the aid of fresh matter for its support, like those found in the tombs of the ancients shut up for centuries. I will not vouch for the truth of their existence; but think it possible that in a vault so close that the air could never be disturbed, the parts of the oil transformed into smoke, and from smoke into soot, might, by sub-formation, arch themselves over the flame so as to protect it from the air, and render it so weak as to lose the power of consuming either oil or wick, so long as there should remain a shred unburnt by which means the primary element existent in the flame and identified with the little self-formed vault, might revolve therein like a little star. It necessarily follows that the second element [Pg 106] became expelled on all sides, while trying to penetrate the pores still remaining in the little dome; and the flame which remained feeble while the place was closed, brightened the moment it was opened, and the external air admitted. The surrounding smoke dispersed, the flame recovers its vigour for a moment, and then expires. Such lamps, in fact, become perpetual, only from having exhausted their oil.”

This statement is extracted from the Fourth Book of the Principles of Philosophy of Descartes. In spite of the respect due to his name, we see in it only a tissue of verbosity exhibiting science at a nonplus, and advocating a groundless theory. But such a chimera on the part of so eminent a man, ought to afford consolation to second-rate capacities, as a proof that no one is exempt from delusions.

From Descartes, let us turn to Archimedes, who conferred ten-fold power upon the arm of man by arming it with the lever; and with becoming deference avow our want of faith in the mirror by the burning reflections of which he managed to destroy the Roman galleys!

“Combustible bodies,” observes Descartes, “cannot be ignited by means of mirrors unless comprehended in the necessary focus. Geometry shows us that the distance of a focus of a concave mirror is equal to the half of its sphere; that is, if the mirror have been set from a [Pg 107] sphere of a radius of one foot, the distance of the focus will be of six inches. A sphere having a radius of one foot, gives, therefore, but a focus of six inches, so that to establish a focus at two hundred feet, would require a sphere with a radius of four hundred feet, or eight hundred in diameter! Besides, how could Archimedes procure such a mirror, when the art of casting mirrors was unknown, and the manufacture of glass in its infancy? That it was a metallic mirror is difficult to conceive. Such were the solutions attempted of an insoluble problem. Doubtful anecdotes are so often and so boldly adopted by the authors of antiquity, that we may regard as unsubstantiated all facts upon which they are silent. Neither Livy, Diodorus, nor Polybius mention the mirror of Archimedes; so that the invention is probably modern, and most likely a fable of the sixteenth century, prolific in inventions and amplifications. The press, then in its infancy, delighted in the propagation of marvels and fallacies attributed by their imbecile authors to the ancients, so as to assign them some semblance of truth. Among such inventions was the mirror of Archimedes.

Gallienus, indeed, mentions the burning of the fleet by Archimedes; but is mute on the subject of the mirror, which he could scarcely have omitted, had the fact been genuine. Tzetzes and Zoronas are the first who mention it; the former in the following words: [Pg 108]

“When the Roman galleys were within arrow-shot, Archimedes caused an hexagonal mirror

to be made, and other smaller ones, each having twenty-four angles, which were placed at a proportionate distance, and could be worked by their hinges and certain metallic blades; their position being such that the rays of the sun reflected upon their surface, produced a fire which destroyed the Roman galleys, though at the distance of a bow-shot."

The author does not condescend to give his authority; relying for the evidence of his authenticity upon his confederate, Zoronas, who relates that, at the Siege of Constantinople, under the reign of Anastasius, Probus burnt the enemy's fleet by means of brazen mirrors. He states that the invention was not new, but belonged to Archimedes, who, as testified by Dion, used them at the Siege of Syracuse by Marcellus.

The mutual confederacy of a couple of mountebanks is as easily understood as it would be susceptible of annihilation; did not such men as Kirchen and Buffon become sureties, not for what Archimedes has done, but for what he was capable of effecting. Previous to Descartes, the former had asserted the possibility of igniting combustible matter at a great distance by means of small plane mirrors, which could be managed so that the rays might be directed [Pg 109] upon any given object. This was simply a theory; but Buffon decided upon making the experiment, the result of which is well known. He caused to be constructed one hundred and sixty-eight little mirrors six inches by eight, and directing their rays towards a point, succeeded in igniting a body at a considerable distance. By this he discovered a new principle, viz: that the action of the solar rays reflected is in direct ratio of the diameter of the focus; proving, moreover, that by multiplying the mirrors, an indefinite line of combustion might be established.

Can we infer, however, from these experiments of Buffon, that Archimedes actually destroyed the Roman galleys? We think not; considering the silence of the Roman writers on the subject, and the progress of science in the time of Buffon, with reference to its discoveries in the time of the Siege of Syracuse by Marcellus. Whether this mirror existed or not, however, Archimedes must be admitted to be one of the greatest geniuses the World of Science ever produced.

CHAPTER XV. [Pg 110]

THE LYNX AND THE CAMELEON.

The title of this chapter seems to promise a fable rather than a dissertation; and a very amusing one might be grounded on the attributes of the two animals, considering the perspicacity affected by poor short-sighted mortals, and the mutability of colour of so many a human mind. It is not, however, as emblems that we are about to treat of the lynx and the cameleon.

The lynx figures extensively in the poetry of the ancients. Not only do they attribute miraculous properties to the eyes of the animal, as being able to see through walls, but Pliny assures us that the excrements of the lynx were transformed into amber, rubies, and carbuncles. The nature or habits of this animal were so delicate, however, that its secretions were as difficult to discover as those of cats; in consequence of which much treasure was lost! They might as well have asserted at once, that jewels found in mines were the produce [Pg 111] of antediluvian lynxes. They proceeded, however, to attribute the optical powers of the lynx to a variety of individuals; nor have modern writers hesitated to follow their example.

Valerius Maximus, Varro, and even Cicero, speak with ecstasies of the powers of vision of the Sicilian, Strabo; who, from Cape Lilybœum could descry Carthage, and count the vessels sailing out of the port; the distance being forty-five leagues! These worthies forgot, that even had the sight of Strabo been still more powerful, the intermediary obstacles caused by the rotundity of the globe must have circumvented his view. Cæsar is said to have seen from Gaul all that passed in a port in Britain; probably by a figure of speech purporting that he knew all that passed in conquered countries, just as the eye of Napoleon was said to survey at once his whole empire.

About the year 1725, the marvellous history of a Portuguese woman set the whole world of science into confusion, as will be found by referring to the Mercure de France. This female was said to possess the gift of discovering treasures. Without any other aid than the keen penetration of her eyes, she was able to distinguish the different strata of earth, and pronounce unerringly upon the utmost distances at a single glance. Her eye penetrated through every substance, even the human body; and she could discern the mechanism, and [Pg 112] circulation of all animal fluids, and detect latent diseases; although less skilful than the animal magnetiser, she did not affect to point out infallible remedies. Ladies could learn from her the sex of their forthcoming progeny. In short, her triumphs were universal.

The King of Portugal, greatly at a loss for water in his newly built palace, consulted her; and after a glance at the spot, she pointed out an abundant spring, upon which his Majesty

rewarded her with a pension, the Order of Christ, and a patent of nobility.

In the exercise of her miraculous powers, certain preliminaries were indispensable. She was obliged to observe a rigid fast; indigestion, or the most trifling derangement of the stomach, suspending the marvellous powers of her visual organs.

The men of science of the day were of course confounded by such prodigies. But instead of questioning the woman, they consulted the works of their predecessors; not forgetting the inevitable Aristotle. By dint of much research, they found a letter from Huygens asserting that there was a prisoner of war at Antwerp, who could see through stuffs of the thickest texture provided they were not red. The wonderful man was cited in confirmation of the wonderful woman, and vice versâ.

The Antwerp lynx, meanwhile, had attained considerable credit, from the fact of two ladies visiting him in person, upon which he burst into immoderate laughter. On the cause of his mirth being inquired into, he stated that one of them had on no under garment, the truth of which statement caused the ladies to take a hasty departure, in the dread of revelations still more indiscreet. [Pg 113]

In the beginning of the present century there lived a physician at Lyons, who seriously asserted that one of his patients had the power of reading letters, though sealed. This was evidently a device to obtain notoriety, and fill his purse at the expense of a credulous public. For what, in fact, can be more grossly absurd than the assertion that either human eyes, or those of the lynx possess the faculty of reading through opaque bodies? Many attempts have been recently made by the upholders of Magnetism to exhibit similar impositions.

From the lynx we proceed to the cameleon; hoping to exonerate this much defamed animal from the imputations of mutability so long lavished upon its nature. Instead of being adopted as the symbol of fickleness, the cameleon ought, in fact, to become the emblem of frankness and truth, betraying in its changes of hue every impression of which it is susceptible.

The ancients denied the existence of the cameleon, treating it as an ideal animal devoid of natural colour. They conceded to it, on the other hand, a radiant body, and the faculty of existing without food. Such were the opinions of Pliny, Aristotle, and Œlian. But Daubenton and Lacépède devoted serious attention to the nature of the cameleon; and the scrutiny of science has served to rectify a popular error. [Pg 114]

Cameleons have been brought alive to France, and a pair is now living in the Zoological Gardens of England. But till lately, they were known in Europe only through the preparations of our Museums of Natural History. This singular animal belongs to the lizard tribe, and is found in hot climates. Its length is from thirteen to fourteen inches; of which the tail counts for half. The head is surmounted by a kind of cartilaginous pyramid inclining backwards. The mouth is so formed as scarcely to afford a view of its disproportionably large swallow. For some time too, the cameleon passed for being devoid of hearing; but Camper has established that it possesses that faculty, though in a limited degree. The organs of sight on the other hand, are so acute as to exceed by far those of the lynx. It can turn its eyes in every direction; moves with deliberate dignity, and feeds on insects. But is not entitled to the encomiums of the ancients with respect to sobriety; though it can fast for a period exceeding a year. Of a pacific nature, it has numerous enemies; and being timid to excess, its endless variations of hue are perceptible through a very transparent skin. Heat and light influence the changes of its colours; which vary between yellow, red, black, green, and white. [Pg 115]

Mademoiselle de Scudery possessed a pair of cameleons, from observations upon which, it was seen that adjacent colours produced no effect upon them; other colours than those near them often manifesting themselves on the body. Bichat supposed that the mutations of the cameleon proceeded from the quantity of air contained in the arterial blood; an opinion the better founded, that this animal is able to fill itself with air and discharge it at will. When asleep, or cold, or dead, the hue of the cameleon is white. Such is the exact truth concerning two animals which poets and historians have invested with fabulous properties; and to which mankind have often been assimilated—by analogies now admitted to be groundless.

CHAPTER XVI. [Pg 116]

WILD WOMEN.

No age has been exempt from popular delusions; but there are certain prejudices peculiar to certain localities. One of the characteristic superstitions of Germany subsisted so lately as the middle of the last century, as may be seen by a tradition of the date of 1753.

“At that time,” said the peasants of Grödich, “it was not uncommon to see wild women issue from the Wunderburg, and approach the youths and maidens attending their herds near the

cavern of Glanegg, whom they asked for bread. Sometimes, they would come out to glean in the fields; leaving the mountain betimes, and at nightfall returning to their haunts without even sharing the meals of their fellow-gleaners.

One day, a little boy mounted upon a cart-horse, approached the Wunderburg, when the wild women rushed forward, and would have carried him off. The father, however, ran up and [Pg 117] protected him. Unaware of the mysteries connected with that awful mountain, he demanded what they meant by attempting to carry off his son; to which the savages replied: 'that among them he would be better taken care of, and that no harm should happen to him in their abode.' But the father held fast his child, and the women went weeping away."

Another time these wild women entered Kügelstadt, a village beautifully situated upon the same mountain, and carried off a boy watching a herd. At the end of a year he returned, dressed in green, and sat on the trunk of a tree at the foot of the mountain.[1] The woodsmen and his parents went the next day in search of him, but in vain; nor was the youth ever beheld again. A wild woman from the mountain went towards the village of Anif, about half a league from Wunderburg, where she hollowed out a place of shelter in the earth.

Her hair was of great length and beauty falling to her feet, and proved highly attractive to a peasant who chanced to encounter her, and who at length ventured to make an avowal of his passion. The wild woman inquired whether he were married; and the peasant not daring to [Pg 118] own the truth, answered in the negative.

Shortly afterwards, his wife, terrified by his absence from home, came in search of him; but instead of upbraiding him with his infidelity, fled in dismay at the sight of the lady of the beautiful locks. The mysterious woman now upbraided him with his want of veracity; assuring him that had his wife testified the smallest jealousy, she would have killed him on the spot. Bidding him be more faithful in future to the marriage tie, she bestowed a bag of money upon him, and was never again seen in the neighbourhood of Grölich.

This story was treated as a jest by several French writers of the last century. Yet the age, so severe upon the credulity of the simple peasants of Wunderburg, believed in the devices of Cagliostro and the miracles of Mesmer! The extremes of science and ignorance may consequently be said to meet in the bewildering mazes of superstition.

CHAPTER XVII. [Pg 119]

SYBILS.

The existence of one or more Sybils in the ancient world has been distinctly proved. Classic authors are unanimous upon the subject. Suidas tells us that there were fourteen; Varro, ten. Œlian asserts that there were only four; while Martinus Capella reduces them to two.

Dr. Petit, however, the author of the Essay "De Sybilla," reduces them to one. Let us grant that the Sybil of Cumæ was the only authentic Sybil, whether originating in Ionia, Syria, or Campania. Let us even establish that her name was Demo, according to Pausanias, though Virgil declares that she was called Deiphobe, and was the daughter of Glaucus. Suidas calls his fourteen by the common name of Eriphile; Aristotle styles the Sybil, Malanchrenes. After due consideration of these names, certain writers unanimously adopted that of Amalthea. Be it our business to inquire into the question upon the only reasonable grounds, namely, in a symbolical sense. A man had need to belong to Rome or Greece to entertain a due respect [Pg 120] for the subject; where the existence of supernatural beings placed by the Gods between heaven and earth, and predominating over Kings and their subjects, was regarded as a blessing. In those times, such creations had a salutary influence of which we cannot now appreciate the value. The ancient social institutions, of so many centuries past, are scarcely to be understood from books; since those by which we are actually surrounded are not altogether comprehensible.

Great was the veneration conceded to the Sybils in Greece and Rome; in proof of which we need only cite the Sybilline volume—to discredit which in the olden time, would have been a matter of danger.

It is known to all that a venerable Sybil came to Tarquin, and offered to sell him nine volumes of her prophecies, when her price being taxed as exorbitant, she threw three volumes into the fire, still requiring the same price for the remaining six. Still denied her price by Tarquin, three more of the books shared the same fate; and on her adhering to her original demand for the remaining three; Tarquin assembled the Augurs, who advised the purchase, and the monarch was forced to submit to the terms of the Sybil.

From that moment, the Sybilline leaves became objects of veneration. They were made over to the custody of the priests, and consulted upon occasions of importance after a decree of [Pg 121] the Senate. These volumes were destroyed in the conflagration of the Capitol, eighty-three

years before Christ; a severe calamity to the Romans, who looked upon the Sybilline books as a sacred charta. It is remarkable, that after the destruction of these volumes, the Republic gradually declined, and fell under the yoke of the Emperors.

Immense as was the loss of the volumes, considering their influence over the minds of the people, the Augurs and Senate hoped to replace the loss. Zealous missionaries were sent to all the cities of Europe, Asia and Africa, which affected to possess Sybilline verses; and more than two thousand were brought back. But we are to conclude they were far from genuine, as the Sybilline oracles declined in credit. Augustus suppressed many of the verses, and the rest were burned by Stilicon, father-in-law of the Emperor Honorius.

In all countries of the ancient world, Virgins were objects of worship; and even as connected with Pagan idolatries, there is something beautiful and touching in the homage paid to virginal purity, more particularly in contrast with the ferocity of manners of the early Romans. The most abject corruption respected the worship of virginity. No virgin could be immolated by the Romans; and Octavia was reduced to infamy ere she could be lawfully sacrificed to the vengeance of Nero. The Sybils were sacred virgins, which accounted for the [Pg 122] veneration paid to them and their oracles. St. Jerome expressly states that the gift of prophecy was bestowed upon them in honour of their purity. As to the Sybil of Cumæ, she was said to have rejected the advances of Apollo himself, though the God offered to endow her with eternal youth and beauty; to which she preferred the infirmities of mortal decrepitude in order to live and die in chastity.

As society is now constituted, nothing founded on error, or the frauds usually called pious, can be termed justifiable. Tarquin and the Augurs probably understood the inauthenticity of the Sybilline books; but it was their cue to create a deep veneration for them, and assign a divine origin to the laws, which in those days might not otherwise have been respected by the people.

In the time of Cicero, the Romans had learned to blush for their own credulity; and in the following centuries, were confounded at seeing the Fathers of the Christian Church return indirectly to ideas long fallen into desuetude. St. Ambrose, however, denounced such doctrines; declaring to the early Christians who were disposed to seek in the Sybilline books exposition of their faith, that they were the idle production of fanatical women.

The Sybils of old were apparently prophetesses after the manner of Joanna Southcote and Madame Krudener in the present century. The Sybilline books, as existent in the days of St. [Pg 123] Ambrose, teemed with frauds and anachronisms, proving the ignorance of their authors, as much as the credulity of those who believed in them. The events of the Christian dispensation are as clearly announced in them as in the Holy Writ. The personages are even mentioned by their proper names. Isaiah wrote: “A virgin shall conceive.” The Sybil is made to say, “The Virgin Mary shall conceive, and shall bring forth Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem.” The Sybil also announces the Baptism of the Messiah in the Jordan; the coming of the Holy Ghost under the form of a dove; the circumstances of the Passion; and the preaching of the Gospel by the Apostles. She pretends to have witnessed events long after the coming of the Messiah; relates the second conflagration of the Temple of Vesta, which took place one hundred and seventy years after Jesus Christ, in the reign of Commodus, and affects to have been in Noah’s Ark; yet is so ignorant of the Holy Writings, that she supposes Noah to have sojourned therein only forty and one days; while Moses states him to have been an entire year. She also places Mount Ararat in Phrygia instead of Armenia.

Such was the value of the last edition of the Sybilline volumes; conceived, no doubt, with good intentions; but, as articles of faith, little better than a fiction.

CHAPTER XVIII. [Pg 124]

FORTUNE-TELLERS AND CHIROMANCY.

Of the numerous family of impostors, composed of mountebanks, gypsies, chiromancers, fortune-tellers, and sorcerers; the gypsies date from the fifteenth century, and were first seen in Bohemia, in strange garbs, with swarthy faces, and pretending to great proficiency in the art of soothsaying.

They made their appearance in Paris, 1442; proclaiming themselves to be pilgrims wandering in expiation of their sin. Among them, were a Duke, a Count, and ten Cavaliers. The remainder, one hundred and twenty in number were on foot. These strangers were lodged at the Holy Chapel, to which the Parisians flocked to obtain a view of them. They had sallow complexions and black frizzly hair, and spoke an unknown tongue. The females who accompanied them, devoted themselves to fortune-telling.

The Bishop of Paris eventually excommunicated them, and had them expelled the city; a [Pg 125]

persecution which served to create an interest in their favour; and returning to Paris, they multiplied both in that city and in other parts of France to such a degree that, in 1560, the States of Orleans found it necessary to rid the kingdom of them; and subject them to the pain of the gallies if they dare return. Treated with merciless severity, they gradually disappeared; taking refuge in Germany, Hungary, England, and the banks of the Danube; where they have remained ever since.

Gypsies are known by different names, according to the countries they inhabit; and constitute a wandering tribe in all the civilized states of Europe, still retaining their pristine habits and customs.

Public curiosity has long been directed towards the origin of the gypsies. Theologians first traced them to Cain on the following grounds: when by the murder of his brother, the elder born of Adam had brought upon himself the supreme malediction, a mark was set upon him to secure his recognition, at that time mankind were white. The Almighty is supposed to have changed the complexion of Cain, that all men might know him. The gypsies, therefore, who exhibit such remarkable complexions, and lead such vagabond lives, had every appearance of being a proscribed race; and the progeny of the first murderer. Other [Pg 126] theologians make the gypsies descend from Shem, the son of Noah, or Cham, the inventor of magic; for the gypsies pretend to be magicians, and to descend from Cham. Father Delrio asserts their sorcery to be so effective, that if you give them a piece of money, the others in your purse invariably take flight to join their fellow.

The gypsies, uncertain of their origin, suppose themselves to have been expelled from Egypt, and condemned to wander the world for having refused hospitality to Joseph and the Holy Virgin, when they took refuge on the banks of the Nile. But even in Egypt, the gypsies are declared to be of foreign origin; so that the problem has still to be decided.

These people ground their predictions upon an inspection of the palm of the hand. Juvenal distinctly alludes to female drawers of horoscopes. “Such a woman,” said he, “exhibits her hand and forehead to the diviner.”

The chiromantic principle has much analogy with those of judiciary astrology; and Aristotle cites chiromancy as a positive science. Chiromancers divide the hand into several regions, each presided by a planet. The thumb belongs to Venus, the index to Jupiter, the middle finger to Saturn, the annulary to the Sun, the auricular to Mercury, the centre of the hand to Mars, the remainder to the Moon. The direction of the line of life is still undecided by [Pg 127] chiromancers; some placing it between the thumb and index, traversing the centre of the palm; while the Hebrew cabalists make it diverge in a quarter of a circle from the middle of the wrist to the first joint of the index. To denote long life, this line should be deeply defined; when feeble and superficial, it implies a limited existence, (even if the person so qualified should have survived his eightieth year!)

The triangle in the palm of the hand is consecrated to Mars; the three lines of which it is formed being regarded by chiromancers as most important, and comprehending the united indications of mind and body. The hepatic line proceeds from the liver, and forms one of the large sides of the triangle. When deeply indicated, it is characteristic of an exalted soul and magnanimous character; but accompanied by a propensity to anger and despondency. The mediana, which forms the base of the triangle, implies frankness, sprightliness, and the love of pleasure. Should the thumb and its root be furrowed with numerous lines, crossing at right angles, or forming ellipses, stars, and repeated circles, you are favoured by Venus; but should you possess the ring of Gyges, beware of her wrath. This name implies the circular line of the thumb, and indicates an infamous death. Adrian Sicler declares in 1639, a notorious villain who met his fate on the wheel had this awful sign on the first phalanx.

Between chiromancers and fortune-tellers with cards, the sole difference consists in the [Pg 128] means employed; and if you watch the sleight of hand of the latter, instead of listening to their chattering, you will be amazed by their dexterity.

Card-conjurors are mere upstarts by comparison with chiromancers, who were consulted by Augustus in the zenith of his power. Their art cannot have existed previous to the days of Charles VI., for whose diversion cards were invented.

The miserable personal plight of these foreshowers of the future, is singularly at variance with their reputation. How many of them grovel in filthy retreats; where for the smallest sum, they dispense their promises of fame and fortune. It is lamentable to think how many dupes such impostors still command. Fortune-tellers captivate the confidence of the vulgar, by predicting circumstances of frequent and common-place occurrence, with the certainty of occasionally hitting home. Should one of these by accident make a fortunate guess, his fame is established. But their extortions are unimportant compared with the debasement of faculties apparent in those who consult them; whom they disgust with their useful callings by fostering hopes of impossible eventualities; or keep weak minds in a state of terror for the mere guerdon of a piece of silver.

There are examples of people being so awe-struck by the predictions of jugglers, as to fall [Pg 129] their victim. A person has been known to die at forty, merely because that term of life was assigned him by a fortune-teller. A slight illness having brought to mind the fatal prediction at the appointed period, cerebral fever ensued which ended in death. Such a fact is

mentioned by Dr. Bruhier in his work upon the Caprices of the Imagination.

Though evil is said never to exist without corresponding good, it would be difficult to point out a compensation for the mischiefs of fortune-tellers and card-conjurors. Their predictions have often proved fatal in private life, and they have exercised their evil influence by urging Princes to acts of cruelty. The Emperor Valens having incensed his subjects by his tyrannies, certain of them, meditating his overthrow, consulted a soothsayer, who predicted future events by means of a cock. A circle being described with the letters of the alphabet around it, a grain of corn was dropped on each, and a cock placed in the centre. The letters from which he pecked the corn were immediately taken up and a horoscope grounded upon them; and the cock having, in the present instance, pecked up grains from letters T. H. E. O. D., the conspirators concluded that the empire ought to belong to Theodore, the Secretary of Valens, a man of merit, and generally esteemed.

The crown was offered to him, which he was rash enough to accept; but the plot being [Pg 130] discovered, he and his accomplices were executed. Not satisfied with this act of vengeance, Valens banished all those whose names began by the letters selected by the cock. But this did not prevent Theodosius the Great from being his successor.

CHAPTER XIX. [Pg 131]

ALBERTUS MAGNUS AND NOSTRADAMUS.

In the year 1248, the Emperor William of Holland arrived at Cologne on the anniversary of the festival of the Epiphany; when Albertus the Great, invited him and his whole Court to a banquet in a garden near the Convent of the Preaching Friars. The Emperor accepted the offer: but on the appointed day, there was a great fall of snow; and the Emperor and his Court were much disconcerted by the invitation.

But though inclined to avoid exposure to such inclemency of weather, they adhered to their engagement and proceeded to the scene of the entertainment, where they found the tables spread, but the trees and turf covered with snow. The guests were of course indignant at so absurd an arrangement; but Albertus had contrived that no one could go out of the garden, by placing at every entrance guards of imposing stature. The Emperor and Princes having seated themselves, the dishes were placed on the table; when the day became gradually [Pg 132] fine, and the snow disappearing as if by enchantment, the shrubs and flowers recovered their verdure and perfume; while the trees suddenly presented fruits in luscious maturity, with innumerable birds perched upon their branches warbling heart-stirring music.

The heat increasing, the guests were forced to throw off their outward garb; but no one could conjecture whence or by whom the dishes of the feast were produced; the menials who served them being strangers, richly attired, and of the most courteous deportment. The feast being at an end, servitors and birds vanished; the turf lost its verdure, the flowers their odour; and the snow re-appeared as if in the gloom of winter. The outward garments of the guests were, of course, resumed; and all persons repaired to a vast hall, where a good fire was blazing.

The Emperor, gratified with this wonderful entertainment, endowed the convent of which Albertus was a member with a valuable estate; expressing great esteem for the skill and dexterity of his entertainer.

Such is the monkish legend; nor is it worth while to contest such absurdities, no one being weak enough to believe seriously in tales of enchantment worthy only to figure in the pages of a romance.

Many such marvels are recorded of Albertus, entitling us to believe him a sorcerer, and the [Pg 133] ally of Satan. But he is known to have been, like Friar Bacon, one of the most enlightened men of the thirteenth century; and it often happens, that in order to enhance the fame of illustrious persons, their biographers have resource to exaggerations that deteriorate their well-won fame. Such was the case with Nostradamus; who, in spite of himself, was made a prophet. The real name of Nostradamus, was Michael of Notre-Dame, but a custom prevailed in his time of latinizing names; and Nostradamus was one of the high-sounding titles likely to ensure popularity. Among the French, it enjoyed equal fame with that of Matthew Länsberg among the Germans.

The family of Nostradamus was of Jewish extraction, and proclaimed itself descended from Issachar; a personage reputed to have been profoundly versed in chronological science. Michael was born, December 14, 1503, at twelve precisely, in the village of St. Remi, in Provence. He studied at Avignon, where he distinguished himself in rhetoric; then proceeded to Montpellier for the study of medicine. Having attained the degree of Doctor at twenty-six, an unusual occurrence, he was considered the successor of Hippocrates and

Galen; but disdaining all earthly vocations, he devoted himself to astrology, and mysterious speculations upon the future.

Nostradamus first published his Ephemeris, proclaiming agricultural epochs, eclipses, [Pg 134] phases of the moon, the returns of the season, and the variations of atmosphere; and predicted the approach of epidemics, the progress of governments, the births and marriages of the great; peace, war, land, and sea fights, and many other things, which, as a matter of course, must be realized in some part or other of the world. His predictions were so fortunate, that he was soon acknowledged to be a prophet; every one seeking to benefit by his vast enlightenment. The wily man, aware that speculation upon popular prejudices is a sure road to fortune, and seeing the love of the marvellous predominate, soon laid aside his almanack, and gave full play to his fecund imagination as a soothsayer.

Had Nostradamus been only a man of profound science, he would have pined in obscurity; but as affording diversion for the Court of France, his fame soon prevailed throughout Europe. When his predictions first appeared, in 1555, they had such success, that Henry II. and Catherine de Medicis invited him to Paris.

Enriched by their munificence, he returned to his vocation in Provence; and four years later, the Duke of Savoy and Marguerite of France, on their way to Nice, visited Nostradamus at Salon. The Duchess being *enceinte*, the Duke desired to know the probable sex of the issue; [Pg 135] a tolerable safe order of prediction as the chances of verification are even. In this case, he foretold a son who afterwards became the greatest Captain in Europe—Charles Emanuel, Duke of Savoy.

The system of Nostradamus was partly original; but grafted upon several others. He not only consulted the stars to cast a nativity, but the form and features of the party. The Governor of Henry IV. wishing to have the horoscope of his youthful master, applied to him, when he demanded to see the royal youth naked. Henry at first resisted, thinking it a trick, and that they perhaps meant to castigate him unjustly; but finally consented, and after the examination, it was predicted that he would become King of France, and enjoy a long reign.

These facts are avouched by the biographers of Nostradamus; who, though he predicted the future to others, was unable to foresee his approaching end. He died in July 1566, aged sixty-two; but his fame survived him, and his tomb became a kind of shrine, being inscribed with testimonials to his profound science and miraculous qualities. Louis XIII. visited it in 1622, and Louis XIV. in 1660.

Like most men possessed of high renown, who profit by the credulity of their contemporaries, he had a host of fanatical adulators. Among them, none more enthusiastically devoted than a man named Chavigny, who abandoned every thing to follow [Pg 136] the fortune of the prophet, and received his last sigh. Chavigny became the interpreter and eulogist of his great master, as he had been the depository of his secrets. He even ventured upon some posthumous predictions.

Inconsolable for the loss of his illustrious master, Chavigny abandoned Provence, and settled at Lyons; where he solaced his regrets by reflecting upon the predictions and discoveries of the great astrologer. He commented upon three hundred stanzas of the great work of Nostradamus, the result of thirty years' study; and published the first part of the "French Janus," or rather, a partial explanation of his prophecies. In this curious work, Chavigny collated, compared and approximated the stanzas bearing reference to the events of his own century; and composed a chronological table, so remarkable for order and method, as to impose upon superficial minds. So singularly happy are some of the stanzas of Nostradamus, and their associations with history are so striking, that the renowned Doctor might almost pass for having been inspired. Such, at least, is the opinion of many who have strictly examined the work.

In 1695, one Guinaud, one of the royal pages and a zealous supporter of Nostradamus, proposed to reconcile the prophecies of Nostradamus with history, from the time of Henry [Pg 137] II. till that of Louis XIV. Presuming upon his genius for exposition, he undertook to prove that nothing could be clearer and less mysterious than the predictions of his favourite astrologer.

In support of this opinion, he applies the following lines to the massacre of St. Bartholomew:

> Le gros airain qui les heures ordonne;
> Sur le trépas du tyran cassera;
> Fleurs plainte et cris, eau glace, pain ne donne,
> V.S.C. Paix, l'armée passera.

The explanation of Guinaud is, perhaps, more striking than the lines of Nostradamus. The "*gros airain*," he declares to be the little bell of the palaces. In the "*trépas du tyran*," he foresees the death of Coligny; and in the initials "*V.S.C.*," he finds an unaccountable indication of Philip II. and Charles V.

The other analogies were equally far-fetched; and, as is not unusually the case, the absurdity of the annotation was visited upon the original work.

The prophesies of Nostradamus, like those of Merlin, are now nothing more than a literary

curiosity.

CHAPTER XX.

[Pg 138]

LEECHES, SERPENTS, AND THE SONG OF THE DYING SWAN.

In the conclusions of naturalists there is much to respect. But we must beware of false inferences.

For instance, no one will deny that swallows skim the surface of the earth on the approach of a storm. But it is simply because insects then swarm in the lower regions of the atmosphere. The swallows seek their prey where instinct teaches them that it is most abundant; not because a peculiar sympathy warns them of the coming storm. Swans, ducks, goslings, also, indicate hot weather by plunging oftener than usual, because the temperature being oppressive, they seek a fresher one under the water.

In the list of meteorological animals, leeches hold a prominent place. An English physician pretends that they are lively when the sky is clear and serene, and raise their heads above water to breathe the pure air. But if the sky be gloomy and clouded, they conceal themselves [Pg 139] in the mud, and are evidently agitated at the approach of storms. The following are the observations of Dr. Vitet, in his “Treaty on Medical Leeches.”

“Close up a quantity of leeches in jars of equal size containing the same water, and expose them together to the open air. Never will you see identity of action. In one jar, they are at the surface, in another at the bottom, while in another they will be completely out of the water sticking to the cover. Again, you will see all the leeches of the same jar in all these different positions; some adhering by their tails from the borders of the jar, others balancing themselves with the most perfect regularity. It follows, therefore, that leeches are devoid of meteorological susceptibility.”

Had not Dr. Vitet made his experiments on so large a scale, a single leech, well-watched, would always have been said to announce changes of weather and temperature. In the case of the Rana Arboria, or tree-frog, which is sometimes confined in a glass jar to form a sort of living weather-glass, it may be noticed that, when two frogs of the same species are kept in the same glass, one is sure to be found at the top of the ladder and one at the bottom, proving how little such indications are to be depended upon.

To leeches is attributed another peculiarity, equally groundless; the faculty, namely, of [Pg 140] ridding us of our corrupt blood, while they respect the pure; a fact disproved by daily experience.

According to a popular prejudice in many countries, snakes and vipers will creep down the throats of persons imprudent enough to sleep in the open fields with their mouths open; and strange things are related on this subject, especially in Germany.

About fifty years ago, the German newspapers announced that in Styria a young girl being asleep with her mouth open, a viper made its way into her throat. She was not aware of the fact; but a few days afterwards began to experience an insupportable irritation. On a subsequent day, the viper reappeared by the channel it had penetrated, hissing and raising itself on its tail as if overjoyed at its emancipation; and immediately afterwards, the girl vomited a quantity of viper’s eggs. This anecdote so charmed the French journalists, that they republished it in various directions, neither suspecting that they were renewing a fable of the Greeks, nor inquiring whether vipers were oviparous.

The adventures of the Styrian girl was nearly forgotten, when a French surgeon gave a fresh version of it in the following shape:

“In the month of June, 1806, a child of four years old having fallen asleep on the bank of the [Pg 141] Canal de L’Ourcq with her mouth open, a snake crept in and passed into her stomach, where it remained for nineteen days; at the expiration of which, the child accidentally drank a glass of white wine, when forth came the snake in the presence of her whole family!” Witnesses were found to attest the fact; and the medical man who attended the child, asserted the reptile to have been eighteen inches long! Dr. Masson, surgeon to the civil Hospitals of Paris, made a report upon the subject to the Faculty of Medicine, attributing the attraction of the snake to the child having fed upon bread and milk, the predilection of those reptiles for that sustenance being well known.

Before we return to the above subject, we may as well inquire whether the predilection of snakes for milk be really true. The French peasants agree in this opinion with Pliny, Aldovrandus and Gesner. Yet all are wrong. Snakes are furnished with numerous little teeth at the extremity of their mouths, that their prey may not escape; so that if they sucked the cows as asserted by the peasants, their teeth must become inextricably entangled in the

udder. The diminution of the milk in the dairies of the French provinces, is nevertheless often most conveniently ascribed to the interposition of snakes, innocent at least of this species of mischief.

We must, therefore, conclude that Dr. Masson's little patient was not the victim of the passion of the snake in question for milk. Is it credible, however, that a snake eighteen inches long could introduce itself into the mouth of a sleeping child without awaking it, or creep down the æsophagus and into the stomach without being perceived? The marvellous snake was probably nothing more than a worm such as is frequently ejected from the mouths of children. [Pg 142]

Snakes, vipers, and serpents have always been leading features in fable, and, at times, in history. Without alluding to the serpent-tempter, we have the serpent of Aaron, which also serves as the attribute of Esculapius, and ornaments the Caduceus of Mercury. We have the serpent Python, and those which entwined themselves round the Laocoon and his sons; the serpent concealed under the flowers, whose sting caused the death of Eurydice; and finally, the asp of Cleopatra. But upon such matters, the moderns have gone far beyond the ancients. If, for instance, the asp which bit the bosom of Cleopatra had pertained to the species which Father Charleroix saw at Paraguay, it might have been the rival of Anthony; for the Padre expressly asserts that serpents are ever on the watch to carry off females in the forests of that province. These may be considered rivals to the Great Sea Serpent of the Americans.

Bertholin, the learned Swedish doctor, relates strange anecdotes of lizards, toads and frogs; stating that a woman, thirty years of age, being thirsty, drank plentifully of water at a pond. At the end of a few months, she experienced singular movements in her stomach, as if something were crawling up and down; and alarmed by the sensation, consulted a medical man, who prescribed a dose of orvietan in a decoction of fumitary. Shortly afterwards, the irritation of the stomach increasing, she vomited three toads and two young lizards, after which, she became more at ease. In the spring following, however, her irritation of the stomach was renewed; and aloes and bezoar being administered, she vomited three female frogs, followed the next day by their numerous progeny. In the month of January following, she vomited five more living frogs, and in the course of seven years, ejected as many as eighty. Dr. Bertholin protests that he heard them croak in her stomach! The utter incompatibility of the nature of these reptiles with the temperature of the human stomach, renders denial of the truth of this scientific anecdote almost superfluous. [Pg 143]

The Journal des Débats, then called the Journal de l'Empire, published the following circumstances as having taken place at Joinville, in the Department of the Meuse.

"Marie Ragot, a widow, having complained for two years of a distaste for food, and suffered from internal cramps. [Pg 144]

"These symptoms were at first attributed to an aneurism of the viscera; but were soon found to proceed from some strange substance in the stomach. After two months, Marie Ragot ejected from her mouth a living reptile in the presence of many; who, on seeing it creep away, in the hurry of the moment, inconsiderately crushed it. This reptile belonging to the lizard class, was thin and long, its colour light grey, brown on the back, and dark yellow under the belly. It had four small legs, each having nail-tipped feelers, a triangular head, rather obtuse at the nose, bent, a short tail and filiform at the extremity. This is all we have been able to learn, the witnesses having stupidly destroyed the reptile. Ragot died soon afterwards, and it remains undecided whether her death was caused by the reptile remaining so long in her stomach. The lizard we have described was doubtless the grey common wall lizard. It is supposed to have crept into her mouth when asleep."

While occupied by consideration of the marvels of physiological history, we must not omit to mention the song of the Dying Swan; formerly applied as a standard of composition for the highest pitch which melody could attain, and as typical of the last strains emanating from the soul of the poet. Virgil, Fénélon and Shakspeare, are known as the Swan of Mantua, the Swan of Cambray, and Swan of Avon. Pliny, whose propensity for handing down popular fallacies we have already noticed, says, in treating of the gift of song conceded to swans by the poets: "The doleful strain attributed to the swan, at the moment of death, is a prejudice disproved by experience." Modern observation confirms his opinion that the song of the swan is a mere metaphor. To urge this matter further would be equivalent to pleading after judgment; had not Dr. Bertholin, who attended the woman of the eighty frogs, endeavoured to revive the idea of the ancients; quoting the declaration of one of his friends, Grégoire Wilhelmi, that having seen one of a flight of swans expire, the others hastened to its aid, giving forth harmonious sounds, as if singing the funeral dirge of their departed companion. [Pg 145]

This story is evidently a romantic fiction. But if the domestic swan be mute, it is not so with the wild one, which is guilty of the most discordant noises, instead of the fabulous harmony so long attributed to it. The Abbé Arnaud carefully observed two wild swans which sought refuge on the waters of Chantilly, more particularly, as regarded their cries. Buffon notices that they have a shrill, piercing shriek, far from agreeable, and are quite insensible to the sound of music. [Pg 146]

The song of the swan, therefore, must be admitted to be as much a creation of the poets as the song of the syrens which, according to Homer, attracted the vessel of Ulysses.

CHAPTER XXI. [Pg 147]

NEGROES.

Two important questions present themselves with regard to negroes: first, the lawfulness or expediency of slavery; and secondly, the comparative equality of the whites and blacks. The History of the World teaches us that slavery is independent of colour, and existed every where of old, under every form of Government. But the abolition of slavery was the work of the Christian religion, of which it is one of the noblest mercies; and let us never forget the saying of Montesquieu, “that it is our business to prove the negroes less than men, lest they prove us to be less than Christians.”

The celebrated Abbé Grégoire was one of the most zealous and persevering advocates of the negroes. So enthusiastic was he in their cause, that he might have been supposed to have undertaken it as a reproach to their white brethren.

With regard to the question of innate equality between the two races, we cannot conceive a more apt illustration than that made by a Creole child, on hearing at his father’s table, a [Pg 148] discussion upon negroes, a subject on which most colonists differ entirely from the Abbé Grégoire.

In the course of dessert, a gentleman, who had been loudest in opprobriating the negroes, desired to be helped to grapes. The child pertinaciously insisted on giving him white grapes instead of the black, to which he had pointed. “One kind is as good as the other,” said the gentleman, “the only difference is in the colour of the skin.” “And why then,” cried the child, “do you persist in refusing the same concession to the poor negroes?”

The scholiasts have written much which has tended only to render more obscure the origin of the negro race; some deriving it from Cain, and attributing its blackness to Divine wrath after the murder of Abel; others from Shem, the son of Noah, which is the opinion of Dr. Hanneman, as is seen in his Latin Treatise upon the colour of “the Descendants of Shem.” The learned German quotes numerous proofs of the culpable conduct of Shem towards his father; adding that Shem had long practised the art of magic, and being unable to transport into the ark all his works of witchcraft and magic, had them engraved upon brass and stone, so as to find them after the deluge. Hanneman cites the authority of Luther, who formally asserts that the skin of Shem was blackened as a punishment for his irreverence; and quotes [Pg 149] a passage from the learned Ulricius, who in his treaty De Tacticis, established that the sons of Ham had white skins, those of Japhet a brownish complexion, while those of Shem were black as ebony.

The anatomist, Meiners, adopting the theory of the facial angle, excluded the negroes from the human race, and placed them in the family of apes and ourang-outangs.

According to the Abbé Grégoire, all black skinned races descend from the Ethiopian. He founds his opinion upon the works of Herodotus, Theophrastes, Pausanias, Athenœus, Eusebius, Heliodorus, Josephus, Pliny, and Terence; all of whom, in speaking of negroes, call them Ethiopians. As regards their origin, all we know is, that the Ethiopians are from the interior of Africa, and that their ancestors had short and woolly hair, black skins, and thick lips.

How are we to conciliate these pretensions with the assertions of Diodorus, the Sicilian, supported by those of the learned Hearne? Some affirm, on the other hand, that the Egyptians descend direct from the Ethiopians; the pure Egyptian race existing only in the Copts, who have woolly hair, round heads, flattened noses, and protruding cheek-bones. Similar signs certainly characterize both negroes and Ethiopians. Egypt was the cradle of civilization, and if inhabited by the Ethiopian race, with the negroes originated sciences, [Pg 150] arts, and institutions. In that case, the problem of equality of intelligence becomes painfully solved; and if we now possess a vast superiority of intellect over the negroes, we owe it to their ancestors, who were our masters in almost every branch of polite knowledge.

With regard to colour, Virgil has said, “nimium ne crede colori.” Dr. Beddoes, moreover, completely overcame the difficulty; for by frequently immersing the hand of a negro in a solution of muriatic acid, he rendered it as white as ivory. In these speculative times, we should not be much surprised to see a company established for washing the black population white. This might furnish matter for reflection to Mr. Williams, of Vermont, who in his History of that State, requires four thousand years for effecting the transition from black to white, through the sole influence of climate.

Meiners, as we have seen, classes the negroes in the monkey tribe. How are we to reconcile this sacrilegious classification with the dogmas of the church, which canonize two blacks, viz. St. Elesbaan, patron of the Portuguese and Spaniards, and the Queen of Sheba, the wife

of Solomon? Another great writer affirms, that black was the original colour of the human race; and that the white race is in a state of degeneration. Monsieur de Pauw shows the question of the negroes in another light, refusing them an aptitude for civilization equal to [Pg 151] the whites; but attributing their colour to the scorching heat of the sun, which, by wasting the brain, diminishes the faculties and organs of intelligence that distinguish Europeans. Dr. Gall goes further, and pronounces the negroes to be wholly deficient in the organs of music and mathematics.

We cannot, however, expect to find the organ of music prominent in the organization of man in a state of nature. As to the organ of mathematics, were the negroes completely deficient in this, Meiners would be correct in his assimilation; for the higher order of mathematics is not here implied, but the simplest acts of calculation. No operation of the mind, however, is possible without the aid of a certain kind of calculation. Moreover, experience tends to confute the system of Dr. Gall. It is well known that in Africa, there are nations far advanced in civilization; a false kind of civilization, perhaps, and tainted with barbarism. They have no opera, for instance, nor a jockey club, nor the excitement of breaking their necks at steeple-chases. But they have cities, tribunals, laws, judges, institutions, and armies; they declare war and make peace; discuss the interests of the State, raise taxes, and regulate the public expenditure. Denyan, who resided thirteen years in the kingdom of Juida, was astonished by their wonderful policy; affirming that their diplomatists were capable of competing with the most wary European cabinets.

The Daccas, who occupy the fertile point of Cape Verd, are organized into a Republic, under [Pg 152] directors, lieutenants, and a hierarchy, analagous to the different States existing in Europe. Bornou is governed by a monarchy; but the throne is both hereditary and elective at the death of the reigning Prince. His successors being selected from among his children without respect to primogeniture. The most worthy is nominated to reign. The funeral discourse is a panegyric or a censure, according to the tenor of the reign of the deceased.

This is stronger evidence of civilization than to possess a tenor equal to Rubini, or a dancer comparable with Taglioni.

The cities of Africa are not mere encampments. The capital of the Foulans has seven thousand inhabitants. Mungo Park mentions that they are fond of instruction, and read the books permitted by the Mahomedan religion with great assiduity. In his expedition to the interior of Africa, this celebrated traveller expresses his surprise at meeting with so much unexpected magnificence. The city of Sego had thirty thousand inhabitants; her population being less than those of Jenna, Timbuctoo, and Haussa.

Barrow extols the character and pleasing manners of the Boushouannas. Their capital, Litah, has from twelve to fifteen thousand souls; ruled by a patriarchal government. The chief executes the will of the people, emanating from a council composed of elders. Is such a [Pg 153] council characteristic of barbarism? Or a proof that the moral organization of the negroes is inferior to that of the whites?

Judging from the narratives of travellers, the maritime populations are generally inferior to those of the interior. If this opinion be well founded, there is every reason to infer that the circumstance arises from the access of Europeans being less frequent with the interior than the littoral. Often have we to deplore the demoralization we have conveyed to distant countries. Is it just, therefore, to speak of the brutal barbarity of the negroes, when all we see of it is partly our own work?

If we proceed from nations to individuals, a whole catalogue of eminent black men and mulattos presents itself. The name of Henry Diaz, demands a prominent place on the list. From a common slave, he became Colonel of a Portuguese regiment, which by his able tactics and daring courage often defeated experienced Generals. In an engagement, in which, overpowered by numbers, he perceived some troops on the point of giving way, he rushed among them exclaiming: “Are these the brave companions of Henry Diaz?” On hearing which, his men returned to the charge, and drove the enemy from the field. In 1645, in the heat of battle, a ball penetrated his left hand which he was about to have amputated, when he exclaimed: “Every finger of my right hand shall learn to grasp the sword!”

The famous St. George was a mulatto. His skill in fencing won him an European reputation, [Pg 154] and no one could surpass him in the art of equitation. Moreover, Dr. Gall would have been forced to admit his prodigious talent for music. Fifty years ago, the compositions of St. George were eminently the fashion in the Parisian drawing-rooms.

The republican armies boasted among the bravest of the brave, General Alexander Dumas, who, though a mulatto, was surnamed by his companions in arms, the Horatius Cocles of the Tyrol. Before Lille, accompanied only by four of his men, he attacked a post of fifty Austrians, of whom he killed six, and made sixteen prisoners. With the Army of the Alps, he scaled Mount St. Bernard, stormed a redoubt, and turned the guns against the enemy. He was the father of the French dramatist, Alexander Dumas, who has immolated as many victims in his dramas, as his father destroyed in the enemies of his country.

Job-Ben-Solomon, son of the Mahomedan King of Banda, on the Gambia, was taken prisoner in 1750, conducted to America, and sold as a slave. He had a superior order of mind, understood Arabic, and was distinguished for his talents. He enjoyed the friendship of Sir

Hans Sloane, for whom he translated several Arabic manuscripts; and was treated with distinction by the Court of London, till the African Company had him reconducted to his States. At the death of his father, he assumed the sceptre, and after being the slave of [Pg 155] Europeans, became the idol of his subjects. The history of Job-Ben-Solomon presents a victorious argument against the prejudice concerning negroes, for in him there existed not only courage but intellect. A son of the King of Nimbana, who was educated in England, died soon after his return to his native land; but during his stay in England, he manifested great proofs of ability. He cultivated several sciences with success, learnt several languages, and read the Bible in the original.

Ramsay, who passed twenty years of his life among the negroes, mentions their impressive eloquence when excited, as well as their talent for mimicry and acting, in which they were not inferior to some of the best performers then known in England. In Africa, they have various national musical instruments, of which sixteen are stringed; without counting their famous balafon, resembling the once famed spinet. Vocal music is as familiar to them as instrumental; and their composers have been known to produce melodies replete with grace. We may here quote Gossec, whose opinion on the subject of music is preferable to that of Dr. Gall, as being one of the greatest musical composers of his time; and in his famous opera of the “Camp de Grand Pré,” he introduced a negro melody from St. Domingo, which met [Pg 156] with immense success. The Abbé Grégoire also speaks of certain itinerant negro minstrels, who sang, played, and narrated like the minstrels of old.

The negro race, therefore, have produced both heroes and artists, as well as figured with distinction in the sciences. Derrham, once a slave at Philadelphia, was made over to a physician, who employed him in the compounding of his medicines. But soon ambition laid hold of the soul of the slave, he acquired French, English, Spanish, and Latin; and perfected himself in the hygienic and therapeutic sciences with such success, that, in 1788, he was esteemed the most eminent practitioner in New Orleans, and consulted from all parts of America.

Another negro, named Amo, claims attention as distinguished in the annals of science. A native of Guinea, he was brought to Amsterdam in 1707, and presented to the Duke Augustus of Wolfenbüttel, who sent him to study at Halle and Wittenberg. After distinguishing himself at both those Universities, he publicly sustained a thesis upon the rights of the negroes, “de Jure Manorum.” Amo was versed in astronomy; spoke Latin, Greek, Hebrew French, Dutch, and German, there were, indeed, few better linguists. Some years ago, a Swedish professor having addressed one of our academies in Latin, the different members, perplexed by their insufficient acquaintance with that tongue, sent in [Pg 157] great haste for one of their absent members, the only one qualified to answer the learned foreigner. This was the late Andrieux; but had the negro, Amo, been in the way, he might have supplied his place. Amo was not only a man of universal information, but had the art of imparting it to others. Differing from his white colleagues, he preferred instructing his scholars to the ambition of acquiring personal renown. His lectures, from the able manner in which he combined the advantages of the ancient and modern systems, attracted numerous auditors. He was invested with a diploma in 1744; the first instance of a negro arriving at that distinction. Amo left a Dissertation upon Sensation considered as distinct from the Soul, and present to the body. Frederick the Great, who then reigned in Prussia, conferred the dignity of Councillor of State upon Amo. But these honours, unprecedented for a man of his colour, did not dazzle him so as to render him insensible to the land of his birth. Pining for his native air, he resolved, after the death of his patron, the Duke of Brunswick, to return, after thirty years’ absence, to his birth-place, Axim, on the Gold Coast; nor was anything further heard of him in Europe after his departure for that obscure place.

Buffon, who was the contemporary of Amo, did not distinguish himself by his definition of the negro race. “Negroes,” said he, “are tall, fat, well-made, but devoid of mind and genius.” [Pg 158] The great naturalist looked no deeper than the epidermis, and was greatly mistaken in asserting negroes to be tall and fat; as in general their stature scarcely equals our own.

Father Charleroy, goes farther than Buffon, by stating that, the negroes of Guinea have but limited capacities, some being quite imbecile, and few being able to count beyond three; that they possess no memory, the past being as unknown to them as the future. “On the other hand,” he observes, “they are docile, simple, humane, credulous, superstitious.” This definition of Father Charleroy may apply to a certain number of negroes; but it also applies to a certain number of whites. Buffon maintains that the negroes colonized at Sierra Leone had only the occupations of women, and a disgust for all useful employment. Their dwellings he states to be miserable hovels; declaring that they prefer sterile and wild spots to beautiful valleys clothed with trees, and watered by the clearest streams. Their roads, he adds, are twice as long as necessary; yet they always follow the beaten track, insensible to the waste of time, which they never calculate. M. Descourtils, who resided at St. Domingo, and closely observed the negroes, declares them to be ignorant, superstitious, and barbarous; their music being detestable and unmeaning. But though such asseverations may be founded to a certain degree on fact—after having shown the difference that exists [Pg 159] between the maritime and fluvial tribes of Africa, and those settled in the interior—we are inclined to inquire whether the negroes of America, more particularly those of St. Domingo, ought to be selected as the standard of the negro race? Are not disabilities attributed to colour which are, in truth, caused by slavery? Had not the Spartan Helots the same skin as

Agis and Epaminondas? Yet what could be more marked than their distinction of nature? Would it even be fair to judge the inhabitants of Paris and London by the swarms of footmen in those cities?

Nevertheless, we are bound to agree with the most experienced physiologists, that, independent of colour, independent of cerebral conformation, independent of facial angularity, the most perfect specimens of the human race are to be found in the temperate regions. The History of the World bears out the fact; and upon this point, the best intentions of philanthropy fall to the ground. Religion and humanity call aloud for the abolition of slavery; while the massacres of St. Domingo prove the necessity of its being prudent and progressive. At some still remote period, posterity will probably abjure the prejudice of the white race against the blacks. But this great revolution of popular feeling will not be effected without long-established previous proof on the part of the negro population, that [Pg 160] the blessings of freedom have brought forth all the fruits anticipated by the advocates of abolition. To decide upon their equality of nature, in their present unequal condition, would be rash and premature.

CHAPTER XXII. [Pg 161]

FASCINATION; OR, THE ART OF PLEASING.

No individual of the human race, but at the bottom of his heart is ambitious to please! But the charm is not more unequal in distribution than the means are various. So various, indeed, and so uncertain, that in our attempts to please we frequently produce the contrary effect.

This universal propensity has given rise to absurd prejudices and ridiculous efforts; and to a thousand arts, and trickeries, affording an amusing subject for consideration.

The desire of pleasing tended greatly to enhance, in the earlier stages of society, the reputation and influence of sorcerers, fairies, and supernatural beings; whose power was often invoked to increase the personal attractions of their votaries. The wild efforts of Medea to secure the affections of her faithless Jason are sufficiently known. Love potions and philtres were a favourite resource of the ancients, never weary of consulting sorcerers [Pg 162] and enchantresses concerning their aptitude to please. Virgil, Ovid, Tibullus, Propertius, all allude to the love charms which could be procured at the hands of different magicians. Ovid, who has so poetically described the delicate mysteries of the art of love, laughs, it is true, at these incentives.

“Had magicians,” says he, “the power of inflaming lovers’ hearts, would Circe have allowed Ulysses to abandon her?”

Horace accuses Canidia of killing children for the purpose of composing love-potions; ignorant, apparently, that animal substances were inadmissible in their composition. Vervain and rue, with a few other mystic plants, gathered by the light of the moon, formed their chief ingredients. According to some, a sovereign charm consists of *enula campana*, or St. John’s wort, plucked on the eve of that Saint, before sunrise, ambergris, and other substances, of which the virtue would be forfeited unless superscribed with the word “Scheva.”

One of the most ingenious authors of antiquity, Apuleius, has given, in his work of the Golden Ass, a recipe for a love-charm composed of different fishes; the claws of crayfish, crabs, and oyster shells. He was accused of having tried its influence in obtaining the affections of his wife to induce her to make a will in his favour. This recipe is the only one of [Pg 163] the kind not limited to the vegetable kingdom.

Pudentilla, a rich dowager, who had been a widow for fifteen years, chose for her future husband, the young, handsome, and clever Apuleius, who, according to the account of the “Golden Ass,” pleaded his cause as follows before the tribunal.

“I am accused,” said he, “of sorcery, because Pudentilla espoused me after fifteen years of widowhood. But would it not be better to inquire why she consented to remain a widow so long? In support of the accusation of magic, you say that I instructed fishermen to bring me fish for unlawful purposes. Ought I to have employed a lawyer, a blacksmith, or a bird-catcher? I am accused of collecting vermiculated oysters, striped cockle-shells, and sea crayfish. But when Aristotle, Democritus, Theophrastus, and other naturalists made collections of Natural History, did you infer that it was for the confection of love-charms? A child accidentally fell down, in my presence, on my return home, and I am accused of sorcery! For the future, then, I presume I shall be bound to hold in leading strings all the children that approach me; and to prevent all little girls from stumbling, I must pick up the stones in the street, and do away with the threshold of my door, lest any one make a false

step in entering my house. Pudentilla, it seems, informed her neighbours that I was a magician. She might have seen fit to call me a Consul; but would that have elevated me to the consular dignity?” [Pg 164]

Having pleaded his own cause in this vein of pleasantry, the judges acquitted Apuleius, seeing clearly that so amiable and graceful a man needed no love-charm for the conquest of the old widow.

In those times, sovereigns as well as subjects were in the habit of purchasing love-charms! According to Suetonius, Cesonia administered a potion to her husband, Caligula, which increased both his madness and his cruelty. The death of the poet Lucretius was caused by a similar potion administered by his mistress, Lucilia. Eusebius mentions a Governor of Egypt, who died from the same cause, and there are innumerable instances of these potent decoctions producing insanity, as well as fatal enfeeblement of body. Ovid furnishes the true recipe for love: “Ut ameris, amabilis esto!” “To be loved, be amiable!” But such a charm being out of the reach of many, it seems easier to purchase cosmetics at the perfumers, which are about as effective in the creation of the tender passion as the magic potions of darker ages.

A pretension to youthful habits and appearance at an advanced period of life, is perhaps one of the most effectual methods of becoming distasteful and ridiculous.

Still, however, a suitable attention to the care and variations of the toilet, proves a great enhancement to beauty in its civilized state; nor can there be a more vulgar error than the dictum of the poet, proclaiming: [Pg 165]

> “Beauty unadorned, adorned the most.”

In the female bosom, the love of dress is an instinctive passion. Look at two children of the same age, a girl and a boy; the one will be seen to delight in feats of strength and agility; the other, as if in evidence of the desire of pleasing instinctive in the opposite sex, is sure to prefer a doll, a ribbon, or a pretty frock, in place of the drum or gun chosen by the boy. Both have intuitively adopted their different vocations. Both are ambitious to conquer by means suitable to their several sexes.

What prodigies of art have been effected in France in consequence of the love of dress generated in the fair sex by a desire to please; from the period when the fair Gauls attired themselves in a sheep-skin fastened at the throat with a thorn; but were not the less coquettish for this enforced simplicity.

At that period, their notions of coquetry consisted in having fanciful designs tattooed upon their persons; and instead of pearls and diamonds, by way of adornment, cockle-shells were suspended from their ears. Their sole cosmetic consisted in unguents, which we now abhor as characteristic of the Hottentots. [Pg 166]

Can the present inhabitants of Paris be really descended from these savages? At that time all the elegance and refinement of dress, arising from the desire to please, were concentrated in Rome; nor have modern times raised the fair Parisians to a similar state of refinement. Juvenal relates that it was thought indecent by the Roman ladies to spit or make use of a handkerchief in public; and at Athens, the fair sex never presumed to leave their chambers when suffering from a cold. What would they have thought of the disgusting habits of the Parisian belles, who contaminate their handkerchiefs by taking snuff, and yet ornament them with embroideries!—But the ladies of the antique world scrupulously avoided all that could provoke disgust—an essential preliminary in the art of pleasing.

In the early age of the Republic, the most refined cleanliness distinguished the habits of the fair Romans. Under the Cæsars, and after the conquest of the East, a taste for luxury, perfumes, and futilities of all kinds was first indulged; while the sumptuous prodigality of the table surpassed all precedent. The science of cosmetics then attained perfection; and there appeared no limit to their coquetry.

Pliny states that the Roman ladies, in order to make their skin white, made use of a juice expressed from the seeds of the wild grape;—while minium, white lead and chalk, filled up their wrinkles, and effaced unseemly spots. [Pg 167]

“Tabula,” said Martial, “is afraid of the rain; and Sabilla of the sun; the one alarmed for the solution of her complexion, the other lest the heat should evaporate the roses of her cheeks.”

Ovid has transmitted to us a recipe for a paste to secure whiteness of skin, consisting of barley flour and lentils, eggs, hartshorn, narcissus bulbs, gum, and honey.

Poppæa invented a paste, which was moulded like a mask upon the face, to be worn in the house. This mask was called at Rome the husband’s face, because it was only taken off for the suitor. When Poppæa travelled, she was followed by a troop of donkeys, whose milk she used for her toilet; and in the baths of the Roman palaces, the most unlimited luxury prevailed. The ladies were served by numerous slaves, each having particular attributions. One superintended the hair; another the eye-brows; another the hands, which were dyed with pink; another, the face; while the rest were devoted to the care of the wardrobe and jewels.

These customs, handed down both by historians and poets, had solely for their object the desire to please; among women, the most ungovernable of all desires, and exceeding even the love of command. To please, however, is a preliminary to authority.

In modern times, the cosmetic art has become a branch of the sciences, and forms a considerable source of industry and revenue. The walls of our towns are covered with announcements of miraculous discoveries, pastes and capillary oils, odoriferous waters,—all and each being efficacious and infallible. Red hair may be transformed into beautiful black tresses;—baldness may be made to give place to flowing locks; and all these oils, pastes, and masks, which periodically change their name, are in fact the same villanous cosmetics which never yet restored elasticity to a withered skin, converted black to white, or bestowed curls upon a bald pate. Art is great, but Time far greater; nor are the ravages of years to be concealed. In divers of these preparations of lead, bismuth and tin, the sulphurated and phosphoric properties produce the most injurious effects. In others, the calcareous and aluminous substances obstruct the pores of the skin, and by hardening it, annihilate its elasticity. Minium, coral, and vegetable powders, are not less pernicious; their corroding action augmenting, instead of diminishing the ailments of the teeth and gums. [Pg 168]

These salutary observations were made long before our time; and it has been as often observed that for the preservation of the complexion, innocuous substances should be employed such as milk, honey, cucumber, or melon-juice, mallow-water, and above all, that best of cosmetics, fresh water, which is within the reach of all, and wants no alluring aid of Chinese engravings on gilded bottles to recommend its miraculous properties. [Pg 169]

The increased use of baths has fortunately rendered this cosmetic a matter of universal adoption; and nothing is more likely to confer softness of skin.

Anne of Austria, the mother of Louis XIV., had so fine a skin, that no linen could be found sufficiently delicate for her use, which caused Cardinal Mazarin to observe that in another world, her eternal punishment would consist in sleeping in coarse sheets. All the cold cream in the world would not have effected a change in the susceptible epidermis of Anne of Austria; and we repeat that cosmetics are both useless and dangerous.

Not even the consummate art of Jezebel availed to repair the irretrievable ravages of time. Young girls of redundant health have been known to swallow acids to counteract corpulency; after succeeding in which, they die prematurely of pulmonary affections. An equally fatal result of the desire to please is produced by over-lacing. Ladies desirous to conceal their obesity had far better rely upon a well-chosen dress than upon this injurious expedient. On the other hand, a tight shoe only exhibits more prominently a foot of large dimensions. Nothing is more erroneous than the proverb, “that people must suffer in order to look well.” To be graceful, the movements of the body should be unrestrained. [Pg 170]

We have already pointed out the distinction between the art of pleasing, and the desire of pleasing. The desire is common to all, the art limited to a few; and they who charm most are those who please naturally and without effort.

CHAPTER XXIII. [Pg 171]

THE PHILOSOPHER’S STONE.

How was the world ever brought to believe that students, in rags, possessed the power of producing gold, when the misery of their personal condition was so apparent? How could individuals, in the enjoyment of competence, ever be tempted to own themselves in the pursuit of chimerical opulence? How could an enlightened century give birth to so monstrous a delusion?

The alchemists, though not comprised among sorcerers, and requiring a separate notice, rivalled them in the pretence to magic; for their volumes abound in recipes for raising the dead, universal elixirs, the regeneration of old people, the transformation of the ugly into the beautiful, and even the creation of men and animals, without other aid than that of a few cinders and herbs!

Such miracles, however, were insignificant compared with the science of producing gold; which, according to some was known to Job. The philosopher’s stone is said, by certain legends, to have been the origin of his fortune; and his poverty to have been occasioned by its loss. These alchemists do not explain how he came to forfeit the scientific powers which had originally produced the stone; such details being beneath the notice of the grand science. [Pg 172]

The philosopher’s stone was, on the contrary, a creation of the fourteenth century, and much accredited among the scientific men of that day. Raymond Lully, Nicholas Flamel, Arnaud de Villeneuve, Paracelsus, and several others, were initiated into the secret. Nicholas Flamel

was a celebrated alchemist, and having acquired an immense fortune, it was attributed to the philosopher's stone, which of course stimulated the cupidity of the proselytes of alchemy. Eager was their pursuit of a study which was to endow them with boundless wealth; and these lunatics found coadjutors in persons of weak and credulous mind, while wiser men diverted themselves by sustaining their hopes, and affecting conviction of their success. Such was Van Helmont, who published his belief in the existence of the philosopher's stone, protesting that he had seen it, and tasted it; that with a grain, he had produced several marks of pure gold.

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The ardour with which conjectural sciences are adopted, proves a serious injury to positive science. Many learned men asserted the possibility of the transmutation of metals; among others, the famous Pica of Mirandola. Alchemists, however, were not unanimous concerning the principles of the art. Some placed its origin in Heaven, and looked upon the rays of the sun as its primitive source; the quintessence of which was called, in their gibberish, the powder of projection. Others maintained that its elements existed throughout every department of nature, constituting the active principle of the universe. Some ascribed the principle to the metals themselves. Mercury presented itself to them as the agent for producing silver, according to the properties we have already described with reference to miraculous showers. According to them, mercury had only to be condensed, its mobility fixed, and its different parts coagulated, to create silver. But by far the greater number indulged in still wider speculations. Most of those who attempted the pursuit were brought to want and wretchedness; and one of them observed, in his last moments, that he could not imagine a bitterer curse to bequeath than the love of alchemy!

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All, however, were not martyrs to the art. Many of its advocates perambulated the world, finding dupes in Princes, Kings and Emperors, who paid dearly for their imaginary discoveries. These mountebanks were the only real possessors of the philosopher's stone. After the treaty of Westphalia, in 1648, the Emperor Ferdinand was convinced that he had converted half a pound of mercury into gold by means of a philosophical tincture; and in commemoration of the event, had a medal struck, bearing the effigy of a youth with a face like a sun, shooting forth rays. On the reverse was inscribed, "Glory to God for deigning to impart to his humble creatures a portion of his infinite power."

The mountebank to whom this transmutation was attributed, by name Richthausen, was created a Baron; and repeated his experiments before the Elector of Mayence and many other Sovereigns. His name was long celebrated in Germany; but his end is unknown. It is well known that Cardinal de Richelieu witnessed several experiments in pursuit of the philosopher's stone, generously rewarding the operator. This may have been an expedient of his Eminence in order to secure the services of these adroit individuals; who, admitted into the bosom of illustrious families, became a source of useful information. Voltaire relates that he saw one, Damusi, Marquis of Conventiglio, handsomely remunerated by certain rich noblemen, after producing, in their presence, two or three crowns of gold.

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No one has written more to the purpose on the subject of alchemists, than Fontenelle. "Nothing but the blindness induced by avidity," says he, "could induce the belief that a man, possessing the power of making gold, must receive gold from another, before he can exhibit his art. How can such a person stand in need of money? Nevertheless, these mountebanks, by their fanatical conduct, mysterious language, and exorbitant promises, far from rendering themselves objects of suspicion, acquire the utmost influence. Without deciding upon the impractibility of making gold, experience teaches us that the extreme difficulty of the operation must render it unavailable in practice, if not in theory. But supposing that by the means of a sulphur of gold, completely separated from other principles, the point were gained by applying it to silver, so as to produce a mass of gold of the same weight and volume, what would be the result beyond a curious experiment effected at an enormous cost?"

In this appreciation of alchemy, Fontenelle expresses himself with the scrupulousness worthy the philosopher who said that he would not have opened his hand had it been full of truth. In this instance he opens it partially, admitting an experimental possibility which he knew did not exist.

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Not only Kings and Emperors, but even the populace, delighting in the marvellous, believed in the existence of the philosopher's stone; choosing to attribute several sudden accumulations of wealth to this mysterious source. Raymond Lullé had become rich by farming the duty imposed by Edward III. upon the exportation of wool from England to Flanders. Arnaud de Villeneuve, an eminent physician and chemist, effected cures by specifics only known to himself, which were highly requited. Nicholas Flamel enriched himself by seizing the ledgers of the Jews when expelled from France; their creditors preferring a settlement with him, to paying their liabilities into the exchequer; in return for which, he effaced their names from the registers.

These mountebanks are now known to have made use of a hollow cane, the extremity being plugged with wax, by introducing which into the crucible, on pretext of stirring up the different matters, as the wax melted the gold fell out, and the miracle appeared to be accomplished.

Others had their crucibles lined with a substance which yielded to the action of the fire, when the gold concealed behind it appeared. These clumsy tricks of legerdemain succeeded

for several centuries; but credulity flits round error, as the moth is attracted by the flame of the taper, and is at length annihilated.

In the beginning of the last century, a well-known Princess was the victim of an absurd fraud. Being famed for her humanity, a wounded soldier knocked at the door of her palace, and solicited hospitality. Having been nobly received, on recovering from his wounds, he [Pg 177] desired to offer some acknowledgment of gratitude previous to his departure. This man pretended to be possessed of three reeds, which, being placed in a crucible, converted mercury into gold. These reeds he pretended to have discovered in a ruined Abbey in Wurzbourg; a fact which he disinterestedly communicated to the Princess; who, in return, loaded him with marks of munificence. When, however, her Highness proceeded to apprize the Bishop of Wurzbourg of the treasure concealed in his diocese, no such Abbey as the one described by the crafty soldier was found to be in existence. This kind of philosophers' stone is not a new invention, and there is little chance of the secret being lost.

There are still many persons engaged in the decomposition and transmutation of metals;—viz: the coiners of base money. Even the Academy of Sciences of Paris has still one member devoted to the miracles of the crucible—Baron Cagnard de la Tour; who has made many wonderful experiments on the nature and reproduction of diamonds.

CHAPTER XXIV. [Pg 178]

GIANTS AND DWARFS.

"Have dwarfs and giants ever really existed?"

"Only so long as no traveller penetrated the countries they were supposed to inhabit," would be the reasonable reply. For since the globe has been explored in all directions, and tourists are compelled to be more measured in their narratives, travellers' wonders are greatly diminished.

A belief in the existence of nations of giants and dwarfs was, however, long entertained; one of the many errors bequeathed to us by antiquity, and adopted by modern credulity.

The ancients had their Titans and Cyclops; of whom Polyphemus, the most towering, was three hundred feet high; while we moderns, more moderate, allow only ten feet to the Patagonian. From the period the Magellan regions became better known, their proportions were still further reduced; and we now allow only an average of seven feet. Credulity, [Pg 179] distance, and the love of the marvellous, tend greatly to the exaggeration of such allotments.

The Bible, like mythology, has its giants; but in most cases, they are exceptional; and it is undeniable that nature often digresses, and produces individuals differing in stature from the ordinary standard of mankind.

Most people have heard of Bébé, the famous dwarf of the King of Poland, who came to Paris in the early part of the Consulate; and of Friand, the giant, whose height exceeded seven feet two inches. But these two were exceptions, not the types of a race. Excepting the Greenlanders, Laplanders, and Samoyedes, there is little variation of stature among the different populations of the globe, certainly not more than a tenth. As regards the inhabitants of the arctic regions, we must bear in mind that their stunted proportions are in harmony with the rigid, and unkindly nature of their climates; in proof of which may be cited the similarity of climate between Lapland and certain vallies of the frozen regions of Switzerland. A similar influence is manifest in the inhabitants of the two localities; the peasants of the Valais, afflicted with the goitre, having more analogy with the Laplanders than with the fine population of Switzerland.

There are few phenomenal races, though many individuals; just as the monstrous fruits [Pg 180] grown for horticultural prizes cannot be regarded as fair samples of a species. It would be as rational to cite, by way of example, the fabulous creations of Rabelais and Swift, the giant Gargantua, and the nation of Lilliputians.

Polyphemus and his Cyclops are real, as they exist in the pages of Homer and Virgil; but ideal the moment Flasellus asserts that the remains of Polyphemus were found in Sicily, near Mount Eripana, of which he gives the following account.

"The giant was seated with his left hand resting on the mast of a ship terminated like a club, and carrying fifteen hundred weight of lead. It crumbled into dust upon being touched, except part of his skull; which would have contained several bushels of corn. Three teeth of which the least weighed one hundred ounces, and a thigh bone, one hundred and twenty feet long, were still perfect." Between Homer, and Virgil, and Thomas Flasellus there is all the difference of ingenious fiction and the grossest imposture produceable in prose.

In former days, the head of Adam was believed to have out-topped the atmosphere, and that he touched the Arctic Pole with one hand, and the Antarctic with the other; one of the hyperbolical exaggerations of the rabbinical Scriptures. After Adam, the rabbins rank Og, the King of Basan, to whom Holy Writ assigns thirteen or fourteen feet, while the rabbinical [Pg 181] writings declare that the stature of Og was such that the waters of the deluge only came up to his knee. In the war against the Israelites, he hurled a mountain against the enemy; but as he held it above his head, God decreed that the ants should excavate it, so that it fell about his neck like a collar. Moses, who was six ells high, profiting by the circumstance, grasped a formidable axe, and making a spring of his own height, could only strike the giant on the instep. The King, however, fell, and encumbered by the mountain, was put to death.

Polyphemus, and all other giants might have danced upon the palm of King Og; and the thigh of the Cyclops would scarcely have furnished him a toothpick. The Jewish rabbins affirm that the thigh bone of Og, the King of Basan, was about twelve leagues long. They do not, however, give the precise measure.

Pomponius Mela, the most incredible of the authors of antiquity, states that certain of the Indian tribes were of such exceeding stature, that they mounted their elephants as we do our horses. Father Rhetel, a Capuchin friar, saw at Thessalonica the bones of a giant ninety-six feet long; the skull of which could contain twenty-four bushels of corn. Herodotus states that the shoe of Perseus measured three feet. The wise Plutarch, himself adopted the history [Pg 182] of the giant Antæus, related by that illustrious liar Gabirius. According to some historians, King Tentradus was twenty-five feet high; Goliath was nine feet four inches; the Emperor Maximin was more than eight; and the Elector of Brandenbourg, Joachim, had at his Court a man named Michael, who was about eight feet high. The height of Goliath, Maximin and Michael were mere instances of the caprices of nature.

The early legends of stupendous giants arose from the fact, that the fossil remains of antediluvial animals were originally ascribed to the human race; whereas, geologists have never found, either in calcareous or granitical formations, any bones of the human species which could have preceded the deluge.

Having dismissed the giants, let us consider the dwarfs, concerning whom our conclusions are the same:—that they are exceptions to the general rule. Nay, the impossibility of establishing a race has been proved by a German Princess, who having married and settled several couples of dwarfs, failed in securing a diminutive progeny.

The existence of pygmies is the sole question concerning the dwarfish species requiring attention; but though so long credited by the ancients, it is now looked upon as fabulous. Aristotle, the evangelist of science, affirms that pygmies were not fabulous; and placed them near the source of the Nile, in a country created purposely for them, in which the nature of [Pg 183] every thing was proportionate. Some authors have pronounced the pygmies to have been twenty-eight inches high; but Juvenal only allows them a foot. These ideal dwarfs must have been about the size of the young American, popularly known under the name of General Tom Thumb.

The pygmies are said to have been courageous and enterprising; dexterous with the bow, and, according to Pliny, hewed down with an axe the corn, which to them was in about the proportions of the oaks of Dodona.

The most valorous exploit attempted by the pygmies was the siege of Hercules. Pliny relates, that one day the son of Alcmena having fallen asleep in the country of the pygmies, their King assembling his troops, led a division against his right arm, surrounded his left, then at the head of his troops charged the head, leaving the remainder of the army to capture the feet. On awaking, Hercules spread out his cloak, and made the whole army of pygmies prisoners. This is a pretty fable, and may have originated the Lilliputians of the Dean of St. Patrick’s. But we have no hesitation in affirming, that though the words giants and pygmies may serve as terms of comparison, they have no prototypes among the nations of the earth.

CHAPTER XXV. [Pg 184]

ASTROLOGY.

Among the most popular delusions of mankind, in earlier ages, were the deductions drawn from the stars, under the name of astrology; a science so long sustained by men of superior intellect, as to justify the credulity of the ignorant. Hippocrates consulted the moon before he administered medicine to his patients. Horace, Virgil, Richelieu, Mazarin, believed in judicial astrology. Some attributed the honour of this discovery to Abraham, others to Zoroaster; while the Greeks claim it for one of the seven Sages of Greeks, Chilo of Lacedemonia, who professed to have discovered in the heavens the germ and principle of our various temperaments.

The Romans adopted these astrological superstitions; and since that period, both the study of the moon and stars, with the view to prognostication, has proved a profitable pursuit. Petronius and the poet Manilius assured their contemporaries that a child born under [Pg 185] Aquarius, could not fail to prefer fountains and cascades. But they forgot that Aquarius was known long before the invention of fountains. Astrology was then in its infancy, but like a youth improved by his travels, it acquired strength and consistency among the Arabs.

Long before the Arabs, however, the great Hermes had asserted: “As men have seven apertures in the head, and there exist seven planets, it must be inferred that every planet presides over one of these apertures in the human head.” The following is the manner in which Hermes disposed of them. He made Jupiter and Saturn preside over the ears; Mars and Venus the nostrils; the Sun and Moon represented the eyes; and Mercury had the care of the mouth. New planets, however, have since been discovered; and in all conscience, the disciples of Hermes ought to have made proportionate holes in the head in support of his doctrines.

Proceeding from the physical to the moral world, they established seven presidencies; Venus over love, Mercury over eloquence, Saturn over grief, the Sun over glory, and the Moon over domestic economy.

After this ingenious arrangement, they assigned to every colour its peculiar star. Blue belonged to Jupiter, yellow to the Sun, green to Venus, red to Mars, probably from his sanguinary influence, white to the Moon, black to Saturn, while Mercury presided over the [Pg 186] different shadings of all the colours. After the theory ensued the application, which was nearly as follows:

“Place a child in the centre of a circle, upon the circumference of which the stars are disposed as at the moment of his conception, or birth. Their influences concentrate upon him, and confer on him a fixed and unalterable destiny. He will be virtuous or vicious, prosperous, or unfortunate in this world, according to the configuration of the planets.”

According to the moral character of the stars, the Sun is benevolent and auspicious; Saturn, dull, morose, and cold; the Moon moist and melancholy; Jupiter, temperate, and his influences kindly; Mars, dry and fervent; Venus prolific and affable; Mercury, inconstant and variable.

Astrologers assigned twelve houses to the zodiac, appropriated to the different planets. The first was consecrated to life and the body; from whence emanates the white, black, and copper coloured races, giants, dwarfs, albinos, idiots, and men of genius. The second house is devoted to the interests of society in general; and in the third house, family affairs between relatives of different degrees, excepting testamentary dispositions, to which they devoted a fourth house. To pass from grave to gay, enter the fifth house, where all is mirth, pleasure, and infantine pastimes. Lackies and sempstresses occupy the sixth house, but they [Pg 187] have but little repose if the wall between it and the next house be not tolerably thick; being inhabited by beautiful women, envy, hatred, and malice. The eighth house of the zodiac is the cemetery; the ninth, the head-quarters of voyages, missions, and processions; whilst the tenth is the resort of the highest society, the nobility and dignitaries of state. The eleventh house is destined for the prosperous, who pass their lives in the delights of wit and friendship. The twelfth differs from the preceding, being devoted to the groans of the wretched in their dungeons, and the haunt of treason and shame. In building these zodiacal houses, the representative form of certain Governments had not been anticipated, or a better balance of power might have been effected.

Such were the chimeras of antiquity, as handed down to modern times. Plutarch relied so much on the efficacy of the stars, that he prevented the Lacedemonians from going into battle before the full moon; and Cæsar and Pompey frequently consulted the astrologers. The Emperor Augustus, born under the sign Capricorn, had a medal struck in honour of his natal star. Caracalla had the horoscope drawn of all those he employed; while his policy, favour, and misgivings were uniformly decided by the stars. When the horoscope of any influential person augured ill, Caracalla had him put to death;—a fine triumph for astrology!

Phrenology has now usurped the throne of astrology; and were sovereigns or judges to form [Pg 188] their judgments after the theory of Dr. Gall, they would save themselves a world of trouble.

The reign of Catherine de Medicis was the triumph of astrology in France. Not a high-born dame but had her *Baron*, a name assigned to the family astrologer, who was as much a matter of course as, in other times, a family confessor.

The astrological rage subsided during the reign of Louis XIV; but disappeared only under the Regency. Voltaire, writes in 1757, when he was sixty, that in his youth, the last adepts of astrology, Count Boulainvilliers and the Italian Calonna, foretold his end at thirty years of age. Voltaire remarks, “I have done them by thirty years!”—to which the sequel added upwards of twenty more.

When the Europeans first penetrated the vast regions of Asia, astrology was found to be much in vogue in Persia and China. In the latter country, the Emperor, on his accession, has his horoscope drawn. The Japanese consult the stars previous to undertaking any enterprise. If they succeed, they thank their stars; if they fail, they resign themselves to their irresistible influence.

Astrology had its hero, a Cato or Vatel, in the astrologer Cardan; who, having predicted his death to the day and the hour, and failed in his calculations, killed himself for the credit of science! A more judicious prediction was that of the astrologer to Louis XI.; his master, who having inquired of him the hour of his own death: “Two after that of your Majesty!” replied he; and the oracle became a safeguard over his days. [Pg 189]

Human pride often stimulates the influence of superstition. Napoleon once pointed out his star to Cardinal Fesch, who could not make it out. “It is lost upon you,” said the Emperor, “but I see it plainly enough!” Napoleon affected reliance upon an influence which was known to be auspicious to his fortunes. Had the Cardinal, in return, pretended to similar distinction, he would probably have answered as Jean Jacques Rousseau did to a shopkeeper, who complained of his stars. “How, Sir, do such people as you pretend to have stars?” Were astrologers in general, like Cardan, content to exercise their art upon themselves, we should not oppose their proceedings. But their predictions have been known to produce a panic throughout an entire population. For instance, a German mathematician, named Stoffler, whose audacity was only equalled by the credulity of his proselytes, predicted, towards the end of the fifteenth century, another Deluge for the month of February, 1524. “How was it possible,” he argued, “to escape from the calamity, when at that particular period Mars and Pisces, Saturn and Jupiter were to be in conjunction.” Upon the eve of this awful event, in various countries of Europe, carpenters could scarcely be found in sufficient numbers to build the arks in preparation. [Pg 190]

Not a drop of rain, however, fell during the dreaded month of February, and Stoffler became an object of general ridicule. Far, however, from feeling himself defeated or acknowledging his error, he professed to have made a mistake in the date; and predicted the end of the world for 1588.

These predictions, alarming only to women and children, have been frequently renewed by others. About the middle of the same century, the Jews were one day seen waiting at their windows, expecting the arrival of their Messiah; an Israelite, named Avenar, having announced his coming. Cardan predicted a long and glorious reign to Edward VI, King of England; who nevertheless died in his sixteenth year!

CHAPTER XXVI. [Pg 191]

THE MOON AND LUNAR INFLUENCE.

From the stars in general to the moon in particular, there is but a step; nor will we separate the midnight luminary from the company in which we usually find her. Lovers and poets have from time immemorial found solace in her beams; while the early philosophers pretended that she swallowed stones in the manner of the mountebanks, in order to cast them down upon us in the form of aërolites. This conclusion is as absurd as a thousand others, of which the moon has been the object. The ingenuousness of the old lady, who on hearing continually of new moons, inquired anxiously what became of the old ones, is scarcely more surprising than the complex mass of commentaries and hypotheses which regard the influence of the orb of night.

In former centuries, it was the custom to attribute the decay of public monuments to the influence of the moon upon the surface of granite and stone. Naturalists, however, having watched the work of animalculæ among oysters, madrepores and corals, attributed this to the true cause. In the year 1666, a physician of Caen remarked upon a stone wall of southern aspect forming part of the Abbey of the Benedictines, a number of cavities, into the deep sinuosities of which the hand could be inserted. Instead of attributing this to the moon, he ascertained that they were worked by insects whom he found concealed in the cavities. Experiment opens the safest road to truth; while absurd theories transmitted from generation to generation, obstruct the steps of a temple already sufficiently difficult of ascent. [Pg 192]

Thomas Moult, the author of an almanack superior to the general run of those popular publications, devoted himself to conjectures on the variations of the weather as influenced by the moon; and consulted the observations previously made by the Abbé Toaldo, who had noted down the effect of eleven hundred and six moons upon the weather. He found that nine hundred and fifty were accompanied by changes of weather; while the other one hundred and fifty six, produced no effect. The proportion being as one to six, the chances are that a new moon will produce a change of weather; the influence being susceptible of increase from various circumstances, in the proportion of thirty-three to one, when the new moon is at its perigæum.

Physicians formerly believed the phases of the moon to influence certain diseases. Hippocrates and Galen assigned them as the cause of periodical returns of epilepsy; while [Pg 193]

people of deranged intellect are vulgarly styled lunatics. Bertholon observed the paroxysms of a maniac during one year, and declared them to be aggravated by the full moon. It has been asserted that among maritime populations, a greater number of deaths occurred at the ebb than at the flow of the tide. At Brest, Rochefort and St. Malo, a register was kept for thirty months of the number of deaths, and the hours at which they took place; when the number was found to be less at the hours supposed most fatal. The doctrine of Aristotle, which had still many adherents, was overthrown by experience.

Dr. Mead, an English physician, wrote a treatise on the influence of the moon upon the human constitution, which has also fallen into oblivion.

CHAPTER XXVII.

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APPARITIONS.

The following anecdote is contained in one of the letters of Pliny, the younger, which we select from many which figure in the annals of antiquity as a type reproduced in various forms, with a change of scenery, by an infinite number of chroniclers.

“There was at Athens a spacious and convenient house, which was abandoned because in the dead of night its inhabitants were invariably disturbed by a clash of iron, and rattling of chains, which appeared to approach gradually, and afterwards grow fainter and fainter. A spectre at length appeared, in the shape of an old man with a venerable beard, and his hair standing on end, with chains on his feet and hands, which he shook furiously; so that those who had courage to take shelter in the house passed fearful and sleepless nights. This privation of rest produced illness, which increasing by constant panic, death often ensued.

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“The philosopher Athenodorus having arrived at Athens, and heard the story of the deserted house, hired it, and took up his residence.

“When evening set in, he had his bed put up in the front apartment; and his tablets, lights, and writing implements placed on the table; after which, his attendants retired to the rear of the house. Lest his imagination should conjure up phantoms, he concentrated his whole attention in writing.

“At the beginning of the night, a deep silence prevailed. But at a later hour, he heard the ring of chains, but continued to write on disbelieving the evidence of his ears.

“The noise becoming louder, seemed to approach his chamber door; and on looking up, he beheld the spectre we have described; which seemed to beckon him with its finger. Athenodorus made sign to his visitor to wait, and continued his writing. The spectre shook its chains anew in the ears of the philosopher; who, perceiving it to be still beckoning, rose, took up the light, and followed it. The phantom walked as if sinking under the weight of its chains; and on reaching the court-yard vanished, leaving Athenodorus picking up herbs and leaves to mark the place of its disappearance.

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“On the following day, he sought the magistrates of the city, and begged to have the scene of the adventure examined. On due investigation, a human skeleton, entangled in chains, was found interred on the ominous spot. The bones were carefully collected, and publicly buried; and after receiving the sacred rites of the dead, the spectre never again troubled the repose of the house.”

Pliny does not relate this story as deserving of credence; but offered it to his contemporaries as an ingenious lesson upon the influence of the imagination, serving to inculcate the respect due from the living towards the dead. Honours have been offered to the mortal remains of illustrious men in all times and countries; and a reverence towards the grave may be accepted as an indication of civilization.

Plato affirmed that he saw the souls of the departed flitting about like shadows; a prejudice we forgive the more readily in the man who first revealed the existence of the soul, of which, in the name of Socrates, he consecrated the immortality.

Pausanias relates that whole armies reappeared after death with their arms and baggage.

“Four hundred years after the battle of Marathon,” says he, “the neighing of horses and cries of soldiers were heard upon the scene of action.”

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The object of Pausanias was to hold up to the Athenians the example of their illustrious ancestors by immortalizing the heroic combatants of that memorable battle. But he no more heard the neighing of horses on the spot, than Napoleon beheld forty centuries surveying his army from the apex of the Pyramids, as figurately described in his sublime address to his troops.

Unmindful of the moral sense of things, and prone to judge the recitals of antiquity according to the standard of our own ideas, regardless of the changes of time, in our efforts to rectify the errors of our predecessors, we fall into new ones. Due allowance ought to be made for time and place in perusing such recitals as the following:

“St. Spiridion, Bishop of Trimitonte, in Egypt, had a daughter, named Irene, who died a virgin. After her decease, an individual presented himself and claimed a deposit which had been in her custody, unknown to her father, which was vainly sought for by St. Spiridion. Proceeding, however, to his daughter’s tomb, he called aloud her name, and demanded what she had done with the object confided to her? ‘You will find it buried in such a spot!’ replied a voice from the tomb; and proceeding to the place pointed out, the treasure was found.”

St. Martin of Tours, disgusted by the reverence paid in his neighbourhood to a pretended Saint, proceeded to his tomb, and enjoined him to arise. The dead man issued from his grave, confessed that he was a robber justly punished for his crimes, and condemned to eternal punishment.

To appreciate these two miracles, we must revert to the times of those two saints, that is, to the reign of superstition; in which the priesthood officiated with magisterial power, keeping in check, by their moral influence, the licentiousness of manners, and the perpetration of crime. Of these Bishops, the one saw fit to defend the reputation of his daughter, and inculcate the sacred nature of a trust; while the other chose to exhibit the untenability of an assumed reputation. In both instances, this was probably accomplished by means to which the priesthoods of all countries have not disdained to resort; finding them far more effectual with an unenlightened populace than abstract argument. [Pg 198]

A somewhat similar instance is related by Martinus Polonius, Platinus, and Pierre Damien, of Pope Benedict IX. This Pontiff, they assure us, not only rose again from the grave; but in the form of a wild beast, having the head of an ass, the body of a bear, and the tail of a cat. As he wandered in the forest, a holy hermit met and conversed with him.

The truth is that the three authors of this story were Guelphs, and chose to convert the Ghibeline Pontiff into a monster, by a pretended apparition. So is it ever with party-writers, who do not disdain to have recourse to the most absurd and disgraceful means in order to discredit their opponents.

As regards the vulgar family of ghosts, there can be little doubt that such persons as really believe themselves to have been exposed to spectral visitation, were affected either by some optical delusion, similar to that of the “Fata Morgana” on the coast of Sicily, or the “mirage” of the desart; in most cases, produced by the fatigue of over-study, and infirmity of digestion. Such effects are, also, easily produced by the interposition of malicious or jocose persons, in the way of phantasmagoria. [Pg 199]

A celebrated instance of this kind is on record. The wife of the Provost of Orleans dying in that city, limited by her will to the sum of six golden crowns the expenses of her funeral; which was to take place at the Convent of the Cordeliers. Her heirs conformed strictly to her injunctions; thereby greatly incensing the friars, who determined to be revenged.

The Superior of the Convent caused a young monk to be secreted in the vaults, and instructed him to cry aloud, and utter strange shrieks during the performance of matins, and if invoked, to give no other answer than by knocking thrice. The youth faithfully executed his charge; and, at the moment agreed upon, made a hideous noise; so that the affrighted monks suspended the sacred office. The officiating priest adjured the disturbed spirit to tell them what was the matter; when three solemn knocks formed the only answer, which was repeated three days consecutively.

The phenomenon was soon bruited abroad by the monks; and on the days of holy office, the noise was louder than usual; till the faithful deserted the church in consternation. At length, they had recourse to exorcism; and when the exorciser conjured the phantom, demanding to know whose was the soul in torment, and naming in succession the various persons buried in the church, no answer was returned till they came to the name of the offending lady, when three loud knocks were distinctly audible. The spirit was next interrogated whether she were not condemned to eternal punishment for having secretly embraced the doctrines of Luther; and three, knocks instantly confirmed the charge. She was next asked whether it would not assuage her torments if her body were carried out of the Catholic Church to be more appropriately interred; and three knocks again replied in the affirmative. The Chapter being convoked, decided upon giving up the lady to her husband, as being convicted of Lutheranism. But the Provost, instead of giving credence to the opposition, submitted the case to the tribunals of Paris, obtaining a special commission from the Chancellor Duprat for the purpose. The result was the confession of the secreted friar; whereupon the Superior of the Cordeliers and his confederate were condemned to fine and imprisonment. [Pg 200]

Such delusions have been frequent from the time the Preaching Friars of Bordeaux took occasion to relieve souls of purgatory in proportion to the offerings placed before them, to that of the Convulsionaries, who, at the commencement of the last century, exhibited their freaks on the site of the cemetery of St. Médard. [Pg 201]

The most diverting piece of imposition is that related by Erasmus of a priest, who, finding the fervour of his flock relax to the evident diminution of his revenues, let loose one night in

his burying-ground a quantity of cray-fish, each having a lighted taper attached to it. The parishioners instantly repaired to their pastor, who affirmed that these wandering lights were souls from purgatory in search of masses; a considerably supply of which was ordered on the spot. Owing, however, to the carelessness of the priest, a cray-fish, with a piece of taper adhering to it, was picked up the following day in the church-yard.

Let those who are disposed to yield credit to ghost stories, visit but once a good exhibition of Ombres Chinoises, or Fantasmagoria, or the display of some able ventriloquist; and they will perceive that a good ghost story is as easy of manufacture as a hat or a pair of gloves.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

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NOBILITY AND TRADE.

The subject before us is too closely connected with the prejudices of mankind not to call for consideration. The question is delicate, but we hazard the argument, though at the risk of giving offence.

The honours conceded to men of pre-eminent merit, who have rendered service to their country, or to humanity in general, excite no dissatisfaction;—the reaction begins with the second generation. Hereditary nobility is a time-honoured prejudice. The founder of an illustrious race is entitled to the respect of his contemporaries; but his descendants become esteemed in proportion to the value attached to their name. Unless they have conferred on it additional lustre, the inherited rank exacts little consideration.

Conquest was the origin of the most ancient nobility, as well as the foundation of royalty. In France, from Clovis to Philip le Bel, there were no other races of nobility; but after the reign [Pg 203] of the latter, the Kings of France exercised the right of ennoblement. From a right, nobility in France became a concession. It is clear, therefore, that the power of ennoblement, from the time of Philip le Bel, extinguished the illusions concerning nobility which had previously prevailed. The facile formation of nobility, the metamorphosis of the serf of yesterday into the baron of the morrow, undeceived the multitude as to the right divine they had hitherto attributed to the nobles; and deteriorated the consequence of the order. From that epoch, illustrious names started forth from the middle classes to figure at the Courts of Sovereigns; and in each succeeding reign, we find names issuing from obscurity to cast a halo over the pages of history. Many such still figure there; and some have added fresh lustre to the names bequeathed them by their ancestors.

A King of France one day ennobled all the burghers of Paris; who refused the honour, conscious that, all being noble, nobility must cease to exist.

The homage we pay to a great historical name is a justifiable feeling. Among the ancient privileges of such nobility, one of the finest was that of defending the country against foreign invasion. Previous to the use of artillery, our armies were chiefly composed of cavalry. The infantry became important under Francis I. at the battle of Marignan; after [Pg 204] which, this privilege became of less account. Till then, the defence of the country was entrusted to its nobility.

At the first declaration of war, the King convoked the chief vassals of the crown; who, in their turn, assembled their Barons and Counts, according to the order of the feudal system, —their vassals, and their vassals' vassals; all marching under the banners of their chiefs. Many were reduced to ruin by such expeditions. Montesquieu asserts that fear is the soul of a despotic government, honour of a monarchical, and virtue of a republican. Were he now alive, he would perhaps assign money as the pivot of the representative system. How do things proceed in a citizen kingdom? Precisely as in feudal times! Upon the first decision of a loan, Government convenes the whole financial vassalage, confers with the Barons and Counts of the Stock Exchange, with the puissant lords of speculations, and humbler knights of stock jobbing. Armed cap-à-pie with the irresistible credit of the great vassals, after a series of combats of which the stock-jobbers are the heralds and trumpeters, they defeat the unfortunate Gauls of the Exchange; while the triumphant Franks risk nothing in the expedition. There is little exaggeration in this comparison. It often happens that a mere substitution, and not the overthrow of a system, takes place.

Feudalism still exists, not only in the financial world, but among individuals engaged in the [Pg 205] same profession. Now that the law of constitutional governments has proclaimed the principle of equality, the thirst for distinction and supremacy has become more prevalent than ever.

In military and civil communities, a hierarchy is indispensable to exact respect from the lower towards the higher grades; without which, all discipline would be impossible. But among men equally free, engaged in the same calling, and eating the same bread, we can

imagine nothing more absurd than the assumed superiority of the fortunate over the unprosperous. The insolence of the tradesman in a great way of business towards the tradesman commencing his career far exceeds the insolence of the patrician towards the plebeian; and the field officer of a regiment is often seen to treat his subalterns as though they were footmen.

That artists and men of letters should mutually treat each other according to the reputation they may have acquired, is not surprising; seeing that, in spite of the mercantile nature of modern literary productions, and the dramatic and literary societies formed for the protection of their material interests, men of letters, poets, painters, architects, sculptors, musicians, and even actors, assume in the eyes of the public precisely the place assigned to [Pg 206] each by public favour and success; standing on the ground of their individual, and not upon their corporate, merit.

Nevertheless, in all academies of art, science, and literature, the principle of equality prevails. The only persons they regard as inferior, are those who on their deaths will probably succeed to their places.

Though we have alluded with sneering levity to the Counts and Barons of Finance, we have no intention of speaking lightly on the subject. Nothing can be more serious than the substitution of financial supremacy for those more gloriously earned honours, the extinction of which would strike a death-blow at civilisation.

There are several banks in Europe exceeding in wealth and power the richest citizens of Rome after the conquest of Asia. Independent of steam, of gigantic undertakings, manufacturing or commercial, there is another predominating power of the utmost importance; the enormous accumulation of capital in the hands of a few, not to be lavished like that of the Romans in patronage of the arts, or acts of beneficence; but doled out in speculative fractions, often fatal to the interests of honest industry, and rarely conducing to the interests of the country.

In feudal times, the extortions of the Barons were undeniable; and compulsory labour was a [Pg 207] humiliating hardship. But upon their return from the wars, when exacting from their serfs compensation for their shattered armour, it was at least for the defence of the soil, as well as to face the enemy again, if necessary, that these benevolences were required. In countries where the feudal system is yet in force, such as Russia, the moral existence of the serfs is inferior to that of our manufacturing workmen; while as regards subsistence, the condition of the serfs is much less precarious. Like our peasants of old, they enjoy their family ties, breathe the fresh air, and tread upon their native soil; tilling the land for the benefit of their Lord, instead of receiving a grudging remuneration for their labour.

Having frequently inquired of heads of manufactories, the wages of their workmen; we have received such evasive answers, as to be reduced to our own conjectures on the subject.

Suppose that in a manufactory, one hundred pair of hands be daily employed, and that the profits be £2000 per annum, it is clear that every individual produces £20. A mutual convention exists; the master having the power of dismissing the workman, and the latter of quitting the master; the former being liable to the disasters of fire or bankruptcy, from which the workman is exempt. The manufacturer having embarked his capital, has an unquestionable right to high profits. But all this, is nevertheless serfdom under another [Pg 208] form; and we behold with pity these industrious beings, breathing the burning and mephitic air prevailing in the factories. The serf when sick, is cared for by his Lord; but the factory man is dismissed without ceremony. For in the manufacturing districts, man counts but as a machine, which if worn out, is replaced by another.

We can scarcely be surprised, therefore, if the financial and manufacturing aristocracy,—the strongbox nobility,—assume at the present day the consequence of the chivalrous nobility of the olden time. It is but fair, however, to admit that there are generous-minded manufacturers; just as there were good-hearted Barons among the feudal tyrants.

Much might be added on this subject; but a further disquisition would only prolong into a political discussion, what we have only pretended to treat on the score of vulgar prejudice.

CHAPTER XXIX. [Pg 209]

MERIT AND POPULARITY.

What is popularity? By what indications is it known? Who ratifies its titles? And do those titles, conferred by favoritism, error, influence, prejudice, interest, or flattery, possess more value or more durability than the scattered leaves on which the Sybil inscribed her oracles? Is merit a positive thing or a relative—a matter of conversation, or of proof?

What, we say again, is popularity? How is it acquired? How forfeited? Is it the result of merit, or a capricious out-burst of opinion impersonating itself so as to enjoy its own homage under the traits of a living statue?

To these questions, it is difficult to give a definitive and conclusive reply. Popularity is often the privilege and shield of a fool or rascal; while genuine merit of a real and indisputable quality seldom secures it unless from some accidental cause. Those who aspire to popularity care more for the amount of suffrages, than for their specific worth. They delight in being [Pg 210] the object of popular excitement; and hearing their name re-echoed, assign their personal qualities as the cause of these capricious demonstrations. True merit heeds not such fulsome acclamations;—too well aware that the man who becomes the tool of popularity, ends in being an object of contempt.

There are numerous ways of achieving popularity. But we must not forget to distinguish the difference between the popularity of men, and the popularity of their productions. Both are variable; being subject to the influence of events, the vacillations of parties, and of human inconstancy. Popularity is, however, less fickle as regards the masterpieces of the mind of man, than as regards individuals whom it frequently raises to the sky, the better to fling them down into the dust. A man may sometimes be popular in spite of himself; dragged from his seclusion, elevated above his natural position only to sink for want of appropriate support.

How many examples are to be found in our history, of such ephemeral popularity; the idol of to-day being proscribed on the morrow of his ovation! On such occasions, the public resembles a mind obeying by turns two directly opposite impulsions. In such perplexities, the scales are rarely held with a steady hand; and when they discover a man to be deficient [Pg 211] in the merit they have gratuitously attributed to him, they avenge themselves by unnecessarily depreciating that which they have capriciously overrated. The man who delights in popularity is as much subjugated as the veriest slave in Rome. He must obey those whom he desires to command; must adopt measures he wishes to repress; and if for a moment he venture to pause for the admeasurement of the abyss he is approaching, is taxed with cowardice and treachery!

How great was the popularity of the brothers Lameth, when Mirabeau made the terrible allusion: “And I too could command a triumph. But from the Capitol to the Tarpeian rock, there is but a step!” How great was the popularity of that very colossus of eloquence, Mirabeau himself; who died in the nick of time that he might not survive the public favour which was rapidly declining.

What King was ever so popular as Louis XVI.? Yet his popularity had passed away long before he ascended that throne of revolutions, the scaffold. The popularity of Henri IV. lasted during his life, and was renewed by his tragic end; but lay torpid for a century after his death, to be revived by the genius of Voltaire. Under Louis XIII. and Louis XIV., the name of Henri IV. was never mentioned; and had not the poem of the Henriade refreshed the memory of the only King of whom the people are said to keep holy the recollection; Henri [Pg 212] IV., like Louis XII., and other excellent Kings of France, would have been forgotten.

After repopularizing Henri IV., Voltaire became in his turn the most popular man in France, especially in the regions of the social and intellectual world. Voltaire was the prince of flatterers. He flattered, at the same time, kings and the people, but reproved as skilfully, so that he delighted kings by their personal praise, and the people by general reproaches against kings.

Voltaire enjoyed immense popularity during his life, and high honours after death; but in the sequel, he reaped the bitter fruits of the tree of evil he had planted. All but forgotten during the Revolution, quite so during the Empire, Voltaire only renewed his popularity at the Restoration. The official censure issued against the reprinting of his works, served for a time to restore him to importance.

Voltaire so completely absorbed the attention of his time, that not one of the great geniuses moving in the same sphere, arrived at any thing approaching his popularity. Montesquieu would not compete with him; and even Jean Jacques Rousseau, in spite of the superiority of his style, barely acquired popularity.

In general, popularity attaches rather to political than literary eminence; inclining towards trivialities, such as songs and epigrams, rather than to works of merit. A particular style of [Pg 213] dress, or a cap of a particular colour is often necessary to secure popular favour. Yet popularity among the vulgar is not to be despised, being often the guerdon of works of genuine merit; more particularly as regards the Fine Arts. Barrel organs grinding the beautiful airs of our great composers in the streets, stamp them with a certificate of popularity; while, as regards pictures, their popularity is often insured by the intervention of some unskilful engraver.

Popularity sometimes attaches itself to tyrants; and Caligula and Nero were more popular in Rome than Germanicus. What mattered the slaughter of senators and patricians, or the confiscation of their property, so long as the proceeds afforded food and sports to the people? The populace delight especially in the downfall of royal favourites; and the overthrow of the statue of Sejanus, once the idol of Rome, was hailed with shouts of

exultation. We cannot be surprised, however, that the Emperors of Rome were popular; since Louis XI. of France, and Henry VIII. of England were popular because they humbled the great, and summoned into their council men of the lowest origin.

Cardinal Richelieu completed the work of Louis XI. and destroyed the last vestiges of feudalism. But in this case, the same course produced a contrary effect. Richilieu was not [Pg 214] popular. So true is it that popularity knows neither law nor precedent. Louis XIV., though not individually popular, was honoured for his conquests, so long as he remained victorious. Louis XV. was popular only twice in his long life; once, when a false report of his death had prevailed; and once, when he alighted from his carriage in Paris to kneel before the Holy Sacrament. Popularity possesses a somewhat loose morality; at times adopting the mistresses of Kings; such as Gabrielle d'Estrées, Agnes Sorel, and even the infamous Pompadour and du Barry.

Of the great men who adorned the reign of Louis XIV., few were popular during their life-time, with the exception of Molière and Corneille. Molière, because the power of his genius placed itself between the monarch and his people, castigating the vices of all classes with equal ridicule; Corneille, because he excited the heroism of the kingdom by exalting the Romans. His popularity was, however, less the result of his genius, than of the envious persecutions of Cardinal Richelieu.

Racine, Boileau, La Fontaine, acquired only posthumous fame, purely literary, and likely to last for ever. Men of science are seldom popular; their devotion to science, and the purity of their calling confining their renown within certain limits. Those who benefit by the results of their labours, think of them as lightly as those who enjoy the warmth of the sun, without [Pg 215] bestowing a thought upon its source. Few who use the barrow and the truck are aware that for these useful inventions they are indebted to Pascal; and what more popular than certain proverbs and quotations forming part of every conversation, of which few of us are able to name the author.

The Revolution of 1789 was popular, and men of the highest merit shared in its popularity by their adherence. Mathieu de Montmorency was popular when the representative of the first Christian Barony sacrificed his titles to the love of equality. The Bishop of Autun was popular when he presented to the Constituent Assembly a proposition for applying the revenues of the church to make good the deficit in the public revenue. The Abbé Sièyes was popular when he pointed out the rights of man, omitting to speak of his duties; and no popularity ever exceeded that of Bailly, till the fatal day of his death upon the scaffold. The taking of the Bastille cannot be considered a popular act, if the quality and number of the instigators be taken into account. But the remembrance of the act became popular; and it was consecrated the following year by the first federation solemnized in the Champ de Mars.

Never were there two more striking examples of the changes of public opinion, than Rienzi at Rome, and Marat at Paris. The same populace which dragged the remains of the former [Pg 216] through the mud, afterwards assisted to place his relics in the Pantheon dedicated to the illustrious men of the country.

In like manner, Cromwell, whose memory was for more than a century infamous in England, is about to obtain a statue in the National Senate.

Robespierre forfeited his popularity the moment he attempted to check the effusion of blood of the victims; when the good cause of 1789 had become sanguinary and frantic. Danton was more popular than Barrère. The Girondins were popular with the people; the Mountagre faction with the populace. It is remarkable, that in those times, every new administration of Government was hailed by the acclamations of the people: who were just as sure to rejoice at its downfall. So has it been in every great crisis in France. In public exigencies, promises are made, incapable of realization; every successive Government having shrunk from innovation and reform, when it came to the moment of fulfilment. After the first Revolution, popularity attended their military successes; but deserted the vacillating policy of the Directory, and followed the banner of conquest to Italy, under which the genius of Napoleon first shone forth; saluting its victorious General on his return to Paris, accompanying him into Egypt; and on his second return, raising him to sovereign power.

From the 18th Brumaire, till the year 1812, popularity adhered constantly to a single [Pg 217] victorious standard. At the murder of the Duke D'Enghien, popular enthusiasm underwent a certain degree of modification, and partially adopted the Empress Josephine as the palladium of the imperial fortunes; to which vulgar credulity and subsequent events seemed to lend authenticity. The popularity of the Emperor declined after his divorce.

In our examination of the influence of events upon the French people, we have only twice found them manifest, at the same moment, exultation and sorrow. Their indignation at the Emperor's cruel usage of Josephine, vanished before the cradle of the King of Rome, and France was unanimous in its gratulations on the birth of the imperial infant. The other event is of later date. The day after the assassination of the Duke de Berry, the gloom was universal. Some were horror-struck at the murder, some deeply attached to the Prince and his family; while many were astonished to find a mortal man where they had hitherto only discerned a Prince. Nevertheless, the partizans of the imperial cause regarded the event as the removal of an obstacle.

Popularity escorted Charles X. from St. Cloud to Paris upon proceeding there to take possession of his throne, and restore the liberty of the press, which was destined some day to reverse it. It also attached itself to the gates of the Palais Royal as the residence of the [Pg 218] Orleans family; but merely to mark a growing aversion to the Tuileries; a negative triumph like that of an opposition united only by a common enmity to the powers that be.

In England, a similar transition was visible when the once popular Prince of Wales, adopted by the people in opposition to the Court of the reigning sovereign, became, as Prince Regent, an object of public dislike!

Among the heroes and victims of popularity may be numbered La Fayette. For half a century did he wrestle with the fluctuations of public favour. When at the head of the Urban Guard, which subsequently assumed the name of the National Guard, La Fayette was at the zenith of his glory. The colour of his very horse became popular; and every one adopted his method of dressing his hair. Popularity becoming negligent of her idol, the scowls of the Court served to revive it; but falling into disgrace with the Legislative Assembly, it was again at fault. Thus ended the first act of the drama of La Fayette's popularity.

Madame de Staël pronounced him to be an obstacle to his adversaries, rather than an aid to his friends. The public soon lost sight of the man so long the toy of its caprices. Shut up in the prison of Olmütz, he owed his deliverance to the Conqueror of Italy, and returned to [Pg 219] France unnoticed; he afterwards offended the First Consul by presuming to offer lessons to him upon the art of Government, and till the Restoration lived in complete seclusion.

A trip to the United States, in securing whose Independence he had distinguished himself in early life, served to stir up the smouldering embers of his popularity, which he left no means unattempted to increase; and at the Revolution of July, popularity assigned to La Fayette the honours of a new triumph; restoring to him the command of the National Guard.

The rapidity with which his name fell into oblivion on his decease, proves that these apparitions of departed popularity—these reflections of an earlier favour—are rarely permanent; and that to attain the honours of history, a more solid merit is required than that which secures the ephemeral sunshine of Popularity.

CHAPTER XXX. [Pg 220]

COMETS.

Comets played a leading part among the omens of the olden time; and the appearance of one in the heavens was the signal for popular panic. The unlooked for appearance of a comet became a godsend to the astrologers.

The credit of omens, however, was on the decline from the time when Cato declared that it was impossible for two augurs to meet without a smile; and for the Romans, the discredit of presages and omens was an important matter, nature and all her works furnishing them with indications from which auguries might be elicited. The omens of which they stood most in awe were invariably connected with the left side. Thunder audible from the left, or even the croaking of a frog to the left, filled them with such consternation, that they instantly propitiated the Gods by an offering. The sudden appearance of a mouse, determined Fabius Maximus to abdicate the dictatorship; and the Consul Flaminius renounced a command of [Pg 221] cavalry in consequence of the same sinister omen. Great events certainly proceeded in those centuries from the smallest causes. But in all this, the self-love and vanity of the human race were chiefly apparent, the ancients being convinced that even in the most insignificant details of their lives, the Gods were actively interested.

Hannibal rose superior to this weakness. Having advised Prusias to give battle to the Romans, it is related that the King of Bithynia declined, alleging that the entrails of the victims suggested a contrary conclusion.

"You prefer then," said the Carthaginian hero, "the advice of a sheep's liver to that of the head of a veteran General?—I pity you!"

Ancient history affords only too many instances of similar superstition; from the sacred fowls which were consulted only in imminent dangers, to the deformed children flung into the Tiber, lest they should bring down evil on the republic. The practice of the ancient Germans, by the way, of plunging new-born infants into the Danube to render them robust, is more easily explained; since being necessarily fatal to weakly children, the qualities of the healthy ones who survived were readily attributable to the immersion.

The absurd prejudices connected with the appearance of comets, are about equally deserving of attention. Madame de Sévigné writes upon this subject in her usual lively style. [Pg 222]

“We are visited by a comet,” says she, in one of her letters to her daughter, “which is the finest of its kind, and possesses one of the most splendid tails ever beheld in the heavens. All our great personages are terrified; conceiving that Providence, having nothing better to do than watch over their paltry comings and goings, has decreed their downfall, and sent an intimation of it to the world by means of this comet.” Cardinal Mazarin was just then given over by his physicians, and those about him saw fit to flatter his vanity by pretending that the Almighty had signalized his last moments by a prodigy. Having mentioned to him that a terrible comet was announcing the great event which struck panic into the world, he had strength of mind to jest upon their vile adulation, assuring them that the comet “did him a great deal too much honour.” It would be well, were all men to judge as wisely; for human pride must be blind indeed, to suppose that the stars have no other duty in their spheres than to regulate the affairs of mortals.

A celebrated Spanish author has written concerning comets with even less reverence than Madame de Sévigné.

“Comets,” said he, “are the very braggarts of the sky. They have been aptly used as engines for the intimidation of Sovereigns, who have less to fear upon the face of the earth than other men. Still, it is scarcely necessary that the celestial bodies should derange themselves to appal them, so long as they have the ambition of neighbouring Princes, the insubordination of their subjects, and the numerous plagues of government to hold them in subjection.” [Pg 223]

The same writer attacks the influence of comets in terms less reverential than those of the learned dissertations of Bayle; for he pretends that the earth is too small a planet to attract so vast a meteor. As regards their influence in the necrology of Kings, he proves that the average life of royal personages equals the average life of peasants; without requiring the aid of a comet to announce their natural dissolution.

Various interpretations have been affixed at different times to the appearance of comets. Thus, the one that appeared at Rome, shortly after the death of Julius Cæsar, was regarded as a glorification of the deceased Emperor; and in 1811, on the appearance of the comet which has given its name to the year, as, “l’année de la comète,”—(the wines made from grapes grown under its fervid influence being sold under the name of Comet wines)—an attempt was made to convert it into an homage to the glory of the Emperor Napoleon!

CHAPTER XXXI. [Pg 224]

POPULAR ERRORS.

A popular error of the most fatal kind was the idea formerly prevalent that a drowned person, being overpowered by the quantity of water he had swallowed, was susceptible of restoration by suspending him with the head downwards, so as to force him to disgorge it. More persons owed their death to this stupid operation, than to the suspended respiration it was intended to restore. It is only during the present century that the experiments of the faculty all over the world have pointed out that the only course to pursue with persons taken insensible out of the water, is to restore circulation by warmth and friction of the extremities; and respiration, by the introduction of air into the lungs.

An equally strange legislative abuse connected with this subject, prevailed in Paris till within the last few years. A reward of twelve francs, or ten shillings was given to any person who saved another from drowning by extricating his body from the Seine, while a reward of six-and-thirty francs, or three times as much, was given to the person who rescued a dead body from the water! This was evidently conceived in the hygienic interests of a city, where the river water is in such extensive use for baths and drinking; but it was in point of fact offering a premium for murder: the morality of navigatory populations being in most countries at a low ebb. [Pg 225]

Another French delusion fatal to human preservation, is the idea that the person who cuts down the body of another found hanging, legally involves himself in an accusation of murder; and nothing can be more injudicious than the harshness with which the proceedings of an inquest are often pursued; as if to justify the poltroonery of those whose first impulse on discovering a body is to go in search of witnesses of the circumstances attending the discovery, instead of lending immediate aid.

A more innocent, but not less groundless popular prejudice is, that which attaches itself to that most useful of domestic animals, the ass—the war-horse of the poor. In all countries, this sure-footed and faithful animal is adopted as an emblem of stupidity, from the patience with which it submits to punishment and endures privation. A pair of ass’s ears is inflicted upon a child in reproof of his duncehood; and through life we hear every blockhead of our acquaintance called an ass. Whereas the ass is a beast of great intelligence; and we often [Pg 226]

owe our safety to its sure and unerring foot beside the perilous precipice, where the steps of the man of science would have faltered.

The Fathers of the Church, and the Disciples of the Sorbonne, persuaded of the universal influence of the Christian faith, believed the dark cross on the back of the ass to date only from the day on which our Saviour made his entry into Jerusalem. The ass of the desart was an animal of great price. Pliny mentions that the Senator Arius paid for one the sum of four hundred thousand sesterces. Naturalists have frequently remarked the extraordinary dimensions of an ass's heart, which is thought an indication of courage; and it is the custom of the peasantry of some countries to make their children wear a piece of ass's skin about their person. The ass's skin is peculiarly valuable, both for the manufacture of writing-tablets and drums; which may be the reason why a dead ass is so rarely seen. It is too valuable to be left on the highway. In many places, the ass serves as a barometer. If he roll in the dust, fine weather may be expected; but if he erect his ears, rain is certain. Why should not animals experience the same atmospheric influences as man? Are we not light-hearted in the sunshine, and depressed in a heavy atmosphere.

Louis XI., of France, was a great patron of the ass. His astrologers having failed in their predictions concerning the weather, he dismissed them, and substituted an ass in their place, as being more weather-wise. Certain physicians consider the emanations from the ass's body to possess beneficial medical properties; while, in former days, the blood of the bull was considered poisonous. [Pg 227]

The credulous Plutarch declared that Themistocles poisoned himself with bullock's blood, upon the authority of the priests of Egina, who are also cited by Pliny; and this same bullock's blood, esteemed poisonous, was also considered a moral purification;—sins being expiated by the sprinkling of the human body with the blood of the bull. On solemn occasions, when the criminal was a man of wealth and distinction, so that a bull was dedicated to his use, the blood was made to fall in a perforated vessel, and the criminal standing beneath, received the sacred aspersion upon his face and attire. The Emperor Julian submitted to this act of expiation. Bullock's blood is now known to be as innocuous as that of other animals; and is extensively used in more than one manufacture.

During the Middle Ages, ground glass was supposed to act as an infallible poison; and was long known by the name of "Succession Powder." Montfleury speaks of it in one of his comedies. One of the personages, showing a packet of it, observes: "Here is the making of many an heir!" [Pg 228]

Portal, and several other French physicians, have asserted in their works, that ground glass is fatal to the swallower; and it is frequently used by the poor as ratsbane, mixed up with the compositions intended for the extermination of vermin. Jugglers were the first to controvert this error, by publicly swallowing it with impunity, a feat which Dr. Franck having witnessed, he immediately experimentalized on himself, and published the results as conclusive against the received opinion.

About the year 1810, a physician of Caen, named Sauvage, confirmed the opinion of Franck. A young lady under his care swallowed a quantity of powdered glass for the purpose of self-destruction without experiencing the least injury; upon which Sauvage tried experiments on various animals, administering ground glass to cats, dogs, and rats, on opening the bodies of which, he could not detect the smallest effect. Many similar experiments produced the same results. Dr. Cayol, in presence of his colleagues, swallowed a quantity of irregular fragments of glass. So, also, did Sauvage, without producing the smallest derangement of the digestive organs.

It is worthy of remark, that mountebanks often clear the way for the march of science; a proof that the most trivial observations may be the origin of the grandest results. Some students of Oxford, on visiting Newton, found him blowing bubbles from a straw, and considered the occupation childish. The philosopher was studying the theory of light. [Pg 229]

Since we have alluded to mountebanks, let us devote a few more words to them. Jugglers have been known to swallow, not only pounded glass, but stones and knife blades. A celebrated Spaniard, accused by the Inquisition, proved his innocence by swallowing fiery coals without injury; and the savage found in the woods at Aveyron, devoured all sorts of fowls with their feathers. But these exploits will not bear comparison with those of the Molucca savage, of whom we read an account in a volume entitled: "The Testament of Jerome Sharp," printed in 1786.

"I entered," says the narrator, "with one of my friends, and found a man resembling an ourang-outang crouched upon a stool in the manner of a tailor. His complexion announced a distant climate, and his keeper stated that he found him in the island of Molucca. His body was bare to the hips, having a chain round the waist, seven or eight feet long, was fastened to a pillar, and permitted him to circulate out of the reach of the spectators. His looks and gesticulations were frightful. His jaws never ceased snapping, except when sending forth discordant cries, which were said to be indicative of hunger. He swallowed flints when thrown to him, but preferred raw meat, which he rushed behind his pillar to devour. He groaned fearfully during his repast, and continued groaning until fully satiated. When unable to procure more meat, he would swallow stones with frightful avidity; which, upon examination of those which he accidentally dropped, proved to be partly dissolved by the [Pg 230]

acrid quality of his saliva. In jumping about, the undigested stones were heard rattling in his stomach.”

The men of science quickly set to work to account for these feats, so completely at variance with the laws of nature. But before they had hit upon a theory, the pretended Molucca savage proved to be a peasant from the neighbourhood of Besançon, who chose to turn to account his natural deformities. When staining his face for the purpose, in the dread of hurting his eyes, he left the eyelids unstained, which completely puzzled the naturalists. By a clever sleight of hand, the raw meat was left behind the pillar, and cooked meat substituted in its place. Some asserted his passion for eating behind the pillar to be a proof of his savage origin; most polite persons, and more especially Kings, being addicted to feeding in public. The stones swallowed by the pretended savage were taken from a vessel [Pg 231] left purposely in the room full of them; small round stones, encrusted with plaster, which afterwards gave them the appearance of having been masticated in the mouth. Before the discovery of all this, the impostor had contrived to reap a plentiful harvest.

Some time afterwards, a woman was exhibited near the Louvre, who devoured flints and slate with the utmost avidity. But the scientific world, forewarned by its former credulity, took no note of her peculiarities of appetite.

It is recorded in the Gazette of Health, that the Abbé Monnier, of St. Jean d’Angély, used in his youth to grind between his teeth fragments of stone for recreation, and even in his declining age, continued the custom. He would swallow a spoonfull during the day, and did not consider his dinner complete without them. He was always pale and emaciated, which was attributed to his singular diet. But his brother, who did not feed upon stones, was precisely of the same temperament and appearance. The Abbé lived till the age of ninety-eight. Diseased persons have been known to devour without injury, earth, stones, chalk, and plaster; and an eminent physician used to eat small lumps of plaster-of-Paris, as others swallow sugar-plums.

In the anatomical inquiries of Menelaus Winsemius, a Dutch physician, he relates that in his [Pg 232] time, a peasant of Friesland was in the habit of swallowing flints, wood, glass, and live fish. In Wurtemberg, there was also a miller, who for money would swallow birds, mice, lizards, caterpillars, or fragments of glass and stone. He one day swallowed an inkstandish, with all its appurtenances. These feats were publicly attested by the Senate of Wurtemberg; after which, the man lived nineteen years, subsisting upon twelve pounds of food per diem. There is scarcely a fair throughout Europe at which such feats are not exhibited on a minor scale.

CHAPTER XXXII. [Pg 233]

DREAMS.

In modern times, dreams have become a gratuitous affair; but in the time of lotteries they possessed the greatest value with the votaries of Blind Fortune. At the French offices, a register was kept of lucky numbers, whose prizes were the result of dreams. Not a day passed but the office keepers were applied to for numbers, the combination of which was foretold by dreams.

However great the weakness of those who put undue faith in such omens, it must be admitted that the wanderings of the mind during sleep have been productive of marvellous results. But just as the slightest opinions of Montaigne are the result of the minutest self-study, a person desirous to ascertain the real importance of a dream ought to consider what was the state of health, disposition, mind and feeling of the dreamers. Many dreams constitute a mere continuation of the occupations of the day. Others arise from our habitual [Pg 234] strain of mind. During illness or fever, the mind, and consequently the dreams by which it is perplexed, assume an exalted and unnatural tone.

Authors have been known to compose during their sleep. Voltaire declares that he composed his verses to Monsieur Touron while asleep; and on returning from a ball, what young dancer does not fancy during the night, that the violins of the orchestra are still ringing in his ears? Hippocrates was so persuaded of the analogy of dreams with our physical condition, that he points out specifics against evil dreaming. If the stars turn pale in your dreams, you are to run in a circle; if the moon, you must run in a straight line; if the sun, you must run both in a straight line and a circle to avoid a repetition of the evil omen.

By these prescriptions, he prevailed upon the lazy Athenians to assist their bad digestion by the effect of exercise, so as to procure a calm and gentle sleep.

Pliny, the younger, mentions the following fact: “One of my slaves, who was sleeping with his companions in the place usually allotted to them, dreamed that two men, dressed in white, entered through the window, and having shaven their heads, departed by the way

they came. The following morning he was found shaved, and his hair scattered on the ground.” This was probably some waggish trick practised on him by his companions when in a state of intoxication. [Pg 235]

Valerius Maximus, on the authority of Cicero, relates a remarkable dream:

“Two fellow-travellers arrived at Megara; the one putting up at an hotel, the other at the house of a friend. Scarcely had the former fallen asleep, when he saw his companion imploring him to come to his aid, as his host was attempting to murder him. The impression was so strong as to wake him; when, finding it a delusion, he went to sleep again. Once more, his friend appeared, announcing the accomplishment of the crime, and that his assassin had concealed his body under the dunghill, to which he begged his companion to repair betimes, before they had time to remove it out of the city. Overawed by so awful a vision, the friend rose forthwith, and proceeding to the scene of the murder, found a carter and his cart about to quit the court. On insisting to examine the load, the carter fled; when the body was extricated from the dung, the whole affair discovered, and the host condemned to death.”

This Greek story is related on the authority of Cicero, who was never at Megara, and consequently knew the fact by hearsay. Had Cicero asserted that he witnessed the affair, the story would have been difficult to believe; as it is, posterity is absolved from the smallest credence.

There lived at Marseilles, a bigoted woman, who passed her days at church, and dreamt every night that she was transformed into a lamp: a dream she chose to verify; for, on the day of her death, a silver lamp was suspended, at her cost, in the choir of the church in which she was wont to follow her devotions. [Pg 236]

Dreams are the peculiar province of the poet. Æneas, to justify his abandonment of Dido, cites the commands of his father, who appears to him every night. What more beautiful, except perhaps the dream of Athalia, than the dream of Æneas, in which Hector presents himself to the son of Anchises, pale and ghastly, as after he had become a victim to the vengeance of Achilles? In the Greek plays, and the French tragedies imitated from the Greek, dreams form a prominent feature. The family of Atrides were great dreamers:—Atreus, Agamemnon, Orestes, and Egisthus, the son of Atreus, had all remarkable dreams.

In Lemercier’s tragedy of “Agamemnon,” Egisthus relates that which is evidently the result of a dream;—but he will not admit it to be a dream, declaring that he “did not sleep.”

The impressions of dreams are often so vivid that we confound in our memory real facts with the visions of sleep. Hence, no doubt, the popular expression of “You must have dreamt that!”

The existence of dreams must be coeval with the human race. By the ancients, the Gods were thought to preside over them. The dreams of Pharaoh made the fortune of Joseph; and Artemidorus acquired a great reputation under the Antonines, by interpreting dreams. According to him, to dream of being weighed down by a mountain, portended proscription; and to dream of death, meant marriage. To dream that you are deprived of sight, intimates that you are about to lose one of your children. Artemidorus interpreted dreams in the same manner as the celebrated Mademoiselle Lenormand, or as Mrs. Williams, so well-known in London at the commencement of the present century. [Pg 237]

CHAPTER XXXIII. [Pg 238]

OF PREJUDICES ATTACHED TO CERTAIN ANIMALS.

Innumerable are the auguries which the remnants of ancient superstition have attached to certain animals. To meet a flock of sheep, is considered a lucky omen. To overtake one when proceeding to the house of a friend, determines many people to turn back as indicative of an inhospitable reception.

Two magpies are sure forerunners of good news; but a single one is supposed to foreshow tidings of the death of a friend.

Spiders are of evil omen; though the mischief they convey is attributed, in Scotland, solely to the family of Bruce. There is a French proverb which says, “Arraignée du soir—espoir,” as if the hour of the day influenced the nature of the omen. Lalande, the astronomer, is known to have been fond of eating spiders. Yet the insect is an object of repugnance to most people; and is, in some species, venomous.

Of all reptiles, the toad is the most universally detested; as if gifted with a magnetism of repulsion. The Abbé Rousseau asserts in his Treatise on Natural History, that the sight of a [Pg 239]

toad has been known to produce convulsions and death. “Having enclosed one of these reptiles,” says he, “in a glass jar, I stood watching it; when the creature rose on its hinder legs, fixing its red and inflamed eyes upon me, till I became so faint and depressed, as to be on the point swooning. A cold dew rose upon my face, such as announces the approach of death.” This was probably the result of fear alone. Two living beings cannot long stare fixedly at each other without one giving way. The power of the visual organ is very great; and the stronger controls the weaker. As the pointer arrests the partridge, the eye of Marius arrested the arm of the Cimber sent to assassinate him; and by fixing his eye upon a troublesome dog, Talma could always prevent its barking. The toad is a disgusting animal, but not a noxious animal. It destroys many insects injurious to the beauty of our flower-gardens, and plumpness of our esculents; while for sobriety, it has no competitor. Toads have been found imbedded in blocks of marble and trunks of trees, deprived of all chance of external air or nutriment.

The lizard, which is nearly as unseemly to look on as the toad, has long been deemed the friend of man; and the vulgar had formerly a superstition that a piece of lizard’s tail worn on the person secured good fortune. [Pg 240]

Lizards are sociably disposed, and fond of the human voice. They are said by travellers in Surinam and Cayenne, to awake a sleeping person on the approach of the rattlesnake. Alarmed at the approach of a snake, they have probably been known to cross the face of some man lying asleep; and have thus given rise to a popular fallacy. But if lizards be not the benefactors of the human race, at least they do us no harm; a quality that might be advantageously transferred to many of our own species.

Pliny maintains that oysters grow fat or thin according to the phases of the moon; while most modern oyster-eaters attribute the change to certain months rather than certain weeks of the year. It is an equally erroneous supposition that milk promotes the digestion of oysters; which may be proved by trying to dissolve them in hot or cold milk. The prejudice that they are out of season when no R figures in the name of the month, originated in the difficulty of transferring them fresh from the coast to the capital during the months of May, June, July, and August. By the sea-side, they will be found good at all seasons of the year.

In ancient times, the appearance of an owl in the day-time was esteemed a prodigy; and the Romans used to rush to the temples, offering incense to the Gods! Pliny considers the apparition of an owl an omen of sterility; and an omelet made of owl’s eggs was a sovereign specific against ebriety. Among villagers, the shriek of the owl is still dreaded as a summons to the other world. Yet this bird was favoured by dedication to the Goddess of Wisdom, though ungifted with the powers of divination ascribed by the Greeks to the vulture. According to the ancients, the vulture possessed such olfactory powers, that it could foreshow the death of a person three days previous to his decease. [Pg 241]

It may be observed, that all the animals to which particular superstitions are attached, were known to the ancients; whereas those discovered during the latter ages are free from imputation of supernatural power.

The wild beasts of all climates make man their prey; but none kill him by a look, as was said of the basilisk. Among the ancients, Aristotle, Pliny, and Galen, persisted in the foregoing opinion; and among modern propagators of errors, the German Athazen, and the Italian Vitello. If Rome, the superb, crouched before an owl, a basilisk compelled Alexander to raise the siege of an Asiatic city. Taking the besieged under its protection, a basilisk, esconced betwixt two stones on the ramparts, repulsed, without moving, two hundred Macedonians who were rash enough to attack it. Sir Thomas Brown suggests the possibility, that the poison of the basilisk may be so intense and subtle, as to be darted forth by means of its visual organ. [Pg 242]

The venomous bite of the viper has given rise to a variety of popular prejudices. The tooth of St. Amable was once the only specific; to which succeeded a faith in the antidote of Maltese earth. Meanwhile the utmost efforts of the faculty remain fruitless against the bite of the rattle-snake, of the cobra di manilla, and several other of the more venomous species. The quality of their venom is supposed to remain unimpaired by the death of the reptiles; and instances are cited of individuals having died of handling them, even after being preserved in spirits of wine. The venom is deposited in two vesicles on either side the head, above the muscle of the upper jaw, the remainder of its body being completely innocuous; so that, in former days, viper broth was frequently prescribed in pulmonary complaints. The venom of the viper becomes less intense as it advances in age.

It used to be believed, that the saliva of man was fatal to vipers, as their venom to ourselves; an opinion maintained by Aristotle, Galen, Varro, Pliny, and Figuier, the surgeon. The latter asserts that he killed a viper by the effect of his own saliva. The experiments by Redi, the learned physician of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, and many others, proved the absurdity of the idea. [Pg 243]

Benvenuto Cellini declares, in his Memoirs, that he saw a salamander in the midst of his own fire; probably a lizard, inadvertantly brought from the country among the logs of wood. No one has yet pleaded guilty to having seen a phœnix, though for ages, a popular superstition attached to this fabulous bird. The unicorn also continues to be placed among the apocryphal animals, with the great sea-serpent of the American coast.

The bite of the tarentula spider was long said to produce involuntary dancing; simply because the persons bitten, on applying to the local practitioners of the healing art, were instantly ordered to dance the *pizzica*, the rapid Sicilian dance of the provinces where the tarentula abounds, in order to promote circulation and neutralize the effects of the poison. Whole villages used to assemble to witness the result, and whenever the patient expired of the bite of the reptile, he was said to have danced himself to death. Such is the origin of the Neapolitan superstition of the tarentula.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

[Pg 244]

CONTENT AND COURTESY.

The first ambition of mankind is to be happy. To the brute creation, and to man in a state of nature, happiness consists in sensual gratification. To this, succeeds the factitious happiness of civilization; whence the origin of a variety of popular errors and prejudices. From the days of Horace to our own, people have been prone to envy those who pursue any career but their own. But if the soldier envy the position of the civilian, and *vice versâ*, it is clear that the ambition of being what one is not, arises from the fact that every one is acquainted with the drawback on his own profession, and only appreciates the advantages of that to which he does not belong. La Fontaine never imagined anything more true, or more charming, than the fable of the cobbler entreating the financier to restore him his song and peaceful sleep, in exchange for the hundred crowns he had bestowed upon him. Every one has heard the [Pg 245] Persian apologue of the Sophi, to whom, in a fit of acute suffering, the sole remedy prescribed was the shirt of a happy man; a treasure difficult to discover either in Court or city; till at length a ragged wretch was found in the suburbs of Ispahan, who admitted himself to be perfectly happy; but alas! he had not a shirt to his back; and the cure of the Sophi was not more advanced than before.

History has its lessons on this head as well as fiction. The Comte de Ségur relates in his Memoirs, that previous to the Revolution, the Duke de Lauraguais wrote to him as follows:

“Congratulate me, my dear Ségur. Thanks be to Heaven, I am completely ruined! I have nothing left, but am delivered from the importunities of my creditors.”

Towards the termination of his career, this witty nobleman subsided into voluntary habits of simplicity, differing strangely from his past splendours. Never, however, had he been happier!—His peace of mind was from within; superior to all incidents of birth, position, and fortune.

It requires to have inhabited the various stories of the social edifice, to be able to judge man under the various aspects resulting from fortune and station. Happiness has little to do with [Pg 246] either; fortune and misfortune have alike their evil influences. Covetousness is as insatiable as ambition. In proportion as people scale the ladder of opulence, they discover others richer than themselves to excite their envy; and vanity pervades every rank of society, marring the quietude of the human mind. The laurels of Miltiades gave umbrage to Themistocles; and Cæsar declared that he would rather be the first of a village, than second in Rome. A wiser man was the shepherd who said: “Were I a King, I would keep my sheep on horseback.”

The ceremonies of politeness, when carried to excess, are a source of public inconvenience. The custom of addressing a lady bare-headed, as was the case in France a century ago, when Louis XIV., even in a shower, refused to put on his hat in the presence of females, was the cause of many a serious indisposition. The custom of appearing bare-headed in church is also dangerous to many; and, so far unreasonable, that men are unable to appear in hats, while it would be accounted singular for a woman to appear there without a bonnet. Can any reasonable motive be assigned for such a distinction?

Again, what is the origin of the ridicule attached to a person who is left-handed? It is clear [Pg 247] that some are born with an instinctive facility in the use of the right hand—some of the left. Yet mothers punish their children for using the left hand, as an act of awkwardness. The preference given to the use of the right hand, though existing from the times of antiquity, is not the less ridiculous.

In Holy Writ, the right hand is made an instrument of benediction; which probably conferred a superiority over the left. Theologians also contend that the Son of God sat on the right of the heavenly throne. The Romans conceded such superiority to the right hand, that when at table, they lay on the left side that the right hand might be free. Aristotle maintained that the pre-eminence of the right hand proceeded from the same conformation by which the cray-fish have the right claw larger than the left. Politeness in these days requires we should place the person we wish to distinguish, on the right. The indiscriminate use of both hands is the best lesson to teach a child:—indifference to the distinction bestowed by the assignment

of a place on either, the best lesson to be practised by adolescence.

Parisians consider it a lesson of politeness to their young children to kiss their right hand before receiving any thing presented to them. The left hand is, however, devoted to the wedding-ring. This is not a Christian custom; but prevailed among the Assyrians, Medes, Egyptians, Babylonians, and most of the people of antiquity. [Pg 248]

Many people object to uttering the word farewell in parting from a friend, influenced by a prejudice that a fatality attaches to the word. Whence the French mode of taking leave with "*sans adieu*!"

The compliments formerly paid to a person sneezing are now happily abandoned; having arisen in those early days of civilization when epidemics were so far more frequent and fatal than now. It was the custom, in most European countries, to say "God bless you," to the person who sneezed, lest it should be symptomatic of the commencement of an illness.

Sneezing has been the object of a variety of ridiculous prejudices. Aristotle pronounces sneezing to be a gift from the Gods, and to be honoured as a thing of holiness, and a sign of good health. Hippocrates agrees with Aristotle, and pronounces it a great relief to parturient women. The Rabbins assert that Adam sneezed after his fall; and that in the primitive times, sneezing was a sure prognostic of death; and remained so till the patriarch Jacob obtained from God that it should no longer be the forerunner of dissolution. It is fortunate this change took place previous to the use of snuff; or the snuffbox would have been accounted fatal as that of Pandora.

CHAPTER XXXV. [Pg 249]

THE DIVINING ROD.

The superstition of the divining rod prevailed only a century and a half ago. The following story concerning it, is too curious to be omitted. In the year 1692, a vintner of Lyons and his wife were murdered in their cellar, their assassins making away with their money. All attempts to discover the culprits were vain, till a simple Dauphinese peasant, named Jacques Aymar, boasted that, with the aid of a simple hazel twig, he could discern the assassins. Having visited the scene of the murder, rod in hand, it became agitated; and on following its indications till he reached the right bank of the Rhone, Aymar entered the house of a gardener, where three bottles stood on the table; when, lo! the rod instantly intimated that the bottles had been emptied by the assassins! Two children of the house owned that three ill-looking men had been there; on which Aymar began to obtain some credit. Traces of three men were found imprinted on the sand by the river-side; and, persuaded that they had embarked, Aymar followed them, inquiring as he proceeded, and detecting the spots where they had halted, to the astonishment of those who accompanied him. [Pg 250]

At the Sablon, the rod becoming agitated, Aymar announced that the assassins were evidently in the camp; and his divining rod led him as far as the gate of the prison of Beaucaire; which being opened, twelve of the fifteen prisoners confined were brought before him. But the divining rod was motionless till the approach of a certain humpbacked prisoner, who declared his utter ignorance of the crime committed at Lyons. On the indications of the rod, however, the hunchback being conducted to the gardener's house was recognised as having been one of the party. At length he confessed his guilt; protesting, however, that he was an involuntary spectator, and did not participate in the murder. Having furnished Aymar with information concerning the direction the assassins had taken, he traced their steps to an inn at Toulon, where they had dined the previous evening. On finding that the culprits had put to sea, he also embarked and followed the course of their boat to its landing-place. But on reaching the frontier, all further trace of them was lost.

This wonderful story afforded a topic of discussion to the whole kingdom. So many persons bore testimony to the truth of the story, that it was impossible to doubt it; the more so, that Aymar followed it up with exploits equally wonderful. He detected several thieves, as well as the places where they had concealed their booty; and as a test of his powers, the lady of the chief officer of police possessed herself, by stealth, of the purse of one of her friends, and begged him to come to her and detect the thief. Aymar instantly declared that they were amusing themselves at his expense. [Pg 251]

The Prince de Condé, who, far from being superstitious, had greater faith in his Field-Marshal's baton than the divining rod, could not resist his curiosity to witness the feats of Aymar, and sent for him to Paris. As soon as he recovered the fatigues of his journey, he was conducted to a bureau, from which something of considerable value had disappeared; but whether or not the magnificence of the place annihilated the power of the divining rod, the charm was gone! Holes were dug in various parts of the garden, in which were deposited gold, copper, stones, and other substances. But the rod failed to point out the hidden

treasure. In the interim, a pair of silver candlesticks having been stolen from Mademoiselle de Condé, Aymar's rod pointed out a goldsmith's shop, the master of which being accused, was highly indignant. Thirty-six livres were forwarded, however, the following morning as [Pg 252] the price of the objects; and it was supposed that Aymar had resorted to this expedient, with the view of re-establishing his reputation. But it was all in vain! The divining rod had lost its reputation, and Jacques Aymar was pronounced to be an impostor.

At his own request, however, he accompanied the King's advocate to a street in which a murder had been committed; and the result being unsatisfactory, Aymar was considered either a mountebank, or a man following, with new pretensions, the old trade of recovering for reward the stolen goods, in the abstraction of which he had participated.

Science becomes dangerous in the hands of empirics, as weapons in the hands of children. About forty years ago, a German doctor revived the marvels of the divining rod, grounding his system upon the phenomena of galvanism. But the philosophy of Volta disdained such an association. Pleasantly exposed to ridicule in the admirable pages of the antiquary, it is now estimated as on a par with the charm once supposed to be inherent in the rope by which a human being had suffered the sentence of the law. It is still proverbial with the vulgar, that any singularly lucky person "carries a bit of hangman's rope in his pocket."

Uninquiring incredulity is as great a proof of weakness as over credulousness. The following [Pg 253] instance of that incomprehensible foresight which flashes upon the brain of certain individuals, under the name of presentiment, passed under the notice of Gratien de Sémur.

Madame de Saulce, the wife of a rich planter of St. Domingo, was residing in France about the time of the Revolution. Her husband occasionally visited his native country, leaving his lady at Paris, who was a woman of sense and piety, by no means of a nervous temperament. During the last voyage of her husband, being engaged at cards at an evening party, she suddenly uttered a shriek, and sunk on her chair, exclaiming, "Monsieur Saulce is dead!" Her friends crowding about her, attempted to tranquillize her by their remonstrances, till by degrees she recovered her reason. So powerful, however, had been the sensation or presentiment, that she had no peace till she obtained news of her husband.

A favourable letter arrived; but, alas! the date was anterior to that of her vision. And soon afterwards, one of the friends present at the scene of Madame de Saulce's ejaculation, received a communication from a stranger in St. Domingo, requesting him to communicate to that lady the distressing news of her husband's decease. Monsieur de Saulce had been assassinated by his negroes, on the very day and hour of her fatal presentiment. The event [Pg 254] occurred in the presence of at least twenty persons; and till the day of her death, the widow remained a prey to sorrow mingled with awe and consternation.

In the Memoirs of the great Sully will be found the record of the presentiments of assassination, which oppressed the mind of Henry IV. "The King," says he, "had the strongest presentiment of his dreadful destiny. As the moment of his coronation approached, his alarm and consternation increased; and in answer to my remonstrance, he exclaimed: 'In spite of all you can urge, this ceremony is most distasteful to me. My heart assures me that some misfortune will be the result.' After uttering these desponding words, he sank back, overcome by gloomy anticipations; and remained tapping the case of his spectacles, absorbed in gloomy reverie."

The presentiment of Henri IV. of his approaching assassination, is confirmed by the testimony of L'Etoile and Bassompierre, who, in their Memoirs, relate the same particulars; and the fact is as historically established as the evil dream of Calphurnia, and the denunciation of the soothsayer to Julius Cæsar, on a parallel occasion.

CHAPTER XXXVI. [Pg 255]

BEES AND ANTS.

Dull must be the blockhead, who could reproach La Fontaine with ignorance of Natural History, and pronounce the fable of the "Ant and the Grasshopper" bad, because the fabulist has not shown himself a rigid naturalist. The great fault charged against La Fontaine, by the critics, is having made the grasshopper sing. Its cry is considered by most people far from melodious.

The bee possesses a thousand poetical associations derived from our early conversancy with the Georgics. From the remotest periods of antiquity, bees have been recognised as attached to monarchical government, though not to the Salique law. A hive has been compared to the palace of a Czarina of Muscovy.

The queen bee reigns over hundreds of male subjects with the despotism of a Sultan; with the additional privilege of peopling her own dominions. When the queen is on the point of [Pg 256]

increasing her numerous subjects, the females invade the seraglio of their sovereign, and with their stings exterminate all the male admirers of her majesty. The fecundity of a queen is such, that she can produce sixty thousand of her species annually. The males are easily recognized, being the sleekest and best formed of the hive; and all its labours are carried on by them. To gather honey, and bring back every day to the common exchequer the fruits of the plunder, separate the honey from the wax, and with the latter construct their cell, distil the honey, and die, constitute the duties of the bee.

It has been asserted that the queen bee has no sting, which is an error. Another error prevails, that after a bee has stung, it dies, leaving its sting in the wound. Some one probably crushed a bee, and found the sting in his finger, from which isolated fact a general conclusion has been made.

Réaumur applied himself to the study of bees; not, however, so devoutly as the philosopher, Aristomachus, who consecrated fifty-eight years to it; or the philosopher, Hytiscus, who conceived so great a passion for bees, that he retired into the Desart, the better to observe them. He simply cleared the way of errors, and discountenanced old traditions; but all was conjecture with regard to bees, till the invention of glass hives; when the government of [Pg 257] those interesting insects became no longer a secret. The devotion of the working bees to their queen is now well-known. When in danger, or the hive is attacked, they rush to her aid; and even form a mass to conceal her, and die in her defence.

Réaumur relates the following anecdote of which he was a witness. A queen bee, and some of her attendants were apparently drowned in a brook. He took them out of the water, and found that neither the queen bee, nor her attendants were quite dead. Réaumur exposed them to a gentle heat, by which they were revived. The plebeian bees recovered first. The moment they saw signs of animation in their queen, they approached her, and bestowed upon her all the care in their power, licking and rubbing her; and when the queen had acquired sufficient force to move, they hummed aloud, as if in triumph!

It has been thought that bees were prejudicial to the fructification of plants, by robbing them of their pollen. This is not only an error, but naturalists worthy of faith, are of opinion that their movement in a blossom tends to sprinkle the pollen, and promote fecundity.

Bees are of twofold service to the human race, by furnishing us with the most refined means of lighting our houses, and of brightening our furniture; to say nothing of their aromatic [Pg 258] honey, surpassing the sweetness of sugar.

Little is known of the republics or monarchies of ants; or indeed of their precise form of government. From the most remote period, however, it has been the custom to represent the ant as the symbol of industry.

The industrious habits of the ant cannot be questioned; but their much vaunted foresight, as described by Boileau, and Addison’s Spectator, is now recognized as fabulous.

According to naturalists, the ant is not without a certain analogy with the bee; seeing that they have not one queen to each swarm, but a certain number of queens for the reproduction of the species; there being productive and unproductive ants. The working class is of a neutral sex. The female ant deposits an egg, whence proceeds a worm, which becomes the ant. As architects, also, to ants must be assigned the precedence over bees; their cellular formations resulting from instinct, and not from calculation. In the stupendous ant-hills so frequently seen in forests, what a series of galleries, dormitories, corridors, and magazines is contained; so that the numerous occupants find ample means of circulation. But the ant cannot pretend to the gratitude of man in the same degree as the bee.

The following is a curious and well-attested fact. After the death of the illustrious Lagrange, [Pg 259] Parseval Deschênes, his coadjutor in his scientific pursuits, who announced the coming of Pallas ten years previous to the discovery of that planet—renounced his mathematical researches; and from long habits of study acquired fresh occupation for his mind.

While spending the summer with his friend, M. d’Aubusson de la Feuillade, in the course of one of his rambles in the woods, he found an immense ant-hill, and immediately resolved to make ants his study. He went every day early enough to the ant-hill to see the first ant issue forth; and followed it from the moment of its departure to that of its return.

“About four o’clock in the afternoon,” says he, “I saw my own particular ant arrive heavily laden at the foot of the diminutive mountain; and, finding it impossible to carry its burthen up the hill, deposit it and look around for a confederate. None being at hand, it set forth again; and about fifteen steps on its progress I saw my ant meet another equally loaded. Both halted, and seemed to hold council; after which, they proceeded together to the foot of the ant-hill. Then began the most interesting scene I ever witnessed. The second ant disembarrassed itself of its burthen; and, having provided themselves with a blade of grass, [Pg 260] they slipped it under the overweighted load, and, by their united efforts, conveyed it over the hillock, and entered their respective cells!

“After abandoning the study of mathematics as too abstruse,” observes Parseval, “I found the lever of Archimedes in use in an ant-hill.”

CHAPTER XXXVII.

[Pg 261]

PREPOSSESSIONS AND ANTIPATHIES.

Undue prepossession against or in favour of some object, is as much to be guarded against as any other irrational prejudices.

It is not uncommon to hear people reply when some particular dish is offered to them: “Thank you, I have never eaten any, and nothing could persuade me to touch it.” Such a prepossession scarcely would be pardonable in women or children.

An anecdote is related in the life of Talma, which has lately formed the subject of a drama.

A poor strolling player, universally rejected, arrived, at his wits’ end, in a city where the illustrious actor was expected. A bright idea flashed across his mind to personate Talma; as whom he accordingly announced himself. The authorities of the town hastened to offer him their homage. The theatre was crowded, and all the world enraptured with his performance. [Pg 262] In the midst of his popularity, the real Talma arrived; but foreseeing that a prepossession once established in favour of the imitator was not likely to be easily reversed, departed without making himself known. The chances were that he might have been hissed.

It is difficult to comprehend the use of the flatteries of painters to Princes and Princesses about to be married by proxy. The portraits being exchanged, the betrothed receive a first strong impression, and form their opinions accordingly. A favourable prepossession is conceived; and in place of an agreeable and expressive countenance, a frightful reality is often rendered more frightful by disappointment.

With regard to literary predilections, the works of an unknown author, however meritorious, often lie mildewed on the shelf, while some trash, protected by a favourite name, becomes popular. The admirable leading articles of Benjamin Constant produced no effect till he signed them with his well-known name, when their merit was instantly recognised. When Michael Angelo first exhibited the productions of his chisel, they were treated as far inferior to the sculptures of the ancient world. In the seclusion of his studio, and unknown to any one, he accordingly set to work on a statue of Cupid; of which he broke off the arm, and concealed the mutilated statue in the midst of the excavations making by the Pope. When [Pg 263] the statue was discovered, all Rome fell into ecstasies; pronouncing it to be the work of Phidias or Praxiteles. Michael Angelo immediately produced the mutilated arm, and his former critics became rebuked into silence.

At the time when the rage for Italian music excluded every other composition from the stage, and the great French composers had fallen in public estimation, Méhul avenged himself much in the manner of Michael Angelo. Zealous in the cause of French music, he composed the opera of the Irato, the words by the ingenious Hoffmann; who, to render the illusion complete, made the libretto as incomprehensible as possible. The opera was rehearsed in secret, though fifty persons were engaged in it; and it was circulated in the world, that the forthcoming opera was a mere pasticcio, borrowed from the operas recently in vogue in Italy.

When the curtain rose, the overture was enthusiastically applauded. Still more so, the different airs executed by Ellevion, Martin, and the excellent company of the Comic Opera. The theatre was crowded with enthusiastic admirers of Italian music, whose applause was vehement; one person declaring that the music was by Fioravanti, and that he had heard it at Naples; another, that it was by Cimarosa. At the end of the opera, it was announced to be by Méhul, when the amateurs of the Italian school were confounded. [Pg 264]

Teniers also exposed the unjust prejudices of his countrymen; who, underrating his paintings, they sold far short of their value. Having previously published a report of his death and burial, he instructed his wife to assume widow’s weeds; and, after a certain time, to announce the sale of the paintings of her deceased husband. The stratagem succeeded, his very detractors enhancing the value of his works. Teniers afterwards returned to his native country, and resumed his labours, which were never afterwards disparaged.

When a History of France by Pigault Le Brun was announced, it was pronounced to be detestable long before it appeared; solely because Pigault Lebrun was the author of a variety of amusing novels. The famous physician Portal turned to good account the prejudice that prevails in Paris in favour of fashion. Established in the capital, he was some time without obtaining practice. At length, he devoted all his means to the purchase of a beautiful equipage, and sent it every day to stand before the doors of illustrious patients. Of course the numerous inquirers after the invalid, could not fail to remark the beautiful equipage of the physician in every quarter of the town; and the Marchioness immediately determined to try the physician of the Duchess, and *vice versâ*; till in a short time, Portal received [Pg 265] applications from all quarters, calling in his advice to the noblest sufferers of the capital. Endowed with a distinguished appearance, elegant manners, and considerable powers of

conversation, he became the indispensable attendant of all fashionable invalids; and thus, founded a reputation to which he subsequently proved himself entitled.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

[Pg 266]

THE INFLUENCE OF BELLS UPON THUNDER STORMS.

Science has long demonstrated the folly of ringing church bells during a storm. The vibration of the air, produced by the movement of a bell, was formerly supposed to disperse the fluid; which, on the contrary, it attracts. For these fifty years past, the civic authorities have compelled the bell-ringers to be silent during a storm. In former ages, when the priests caused the bells to be rung during a storm, it was an act of piety and not a physical experiment. Scientific men, on the contrary, have been justified in declaring the vibration caused by the sound of a church bell upon a cloud charged with electricity to be injurious, from the fact that ringers have been struck dead by the electric fluid during the discharge of their functions. But though bells are no longer rung during a storm, the fluid falls just as often upon church steeples. It is, however, as well to forbid the ringing of bells during a storm, for the simple reason that to ring the bells, the ringer must be in the tower, where he [Pg 267] is in greater danger than elsewhere. Steeples are often surmounted by an iron cross, or weathercock, which attracts the fluid.

It is only lately we have made any proficiency in electrical science. Franklin, who at the same moment brought fire from heaven and wrested the sceptre from the potentates of the earth, was the inventor of the conductor, which has probably preserved many monuments from destruction. In the reign of Louis XIV, sailors were in the habit of affixing a pointed sword to the summit of the mast, most likely acting under the experience and impression which produced the conductor. A learned priest, the Abbé Thiers, who died in 1703, in enumerating the superstitious practices of his time, mentions the custom of affixing a pointed sword to a mast during storms. The good old priest saw in it only a kind of superstition; while the discovery of Franklin commanded the admiration of the world. It is not unlikely that from the bosom of vulgar superstitions, science might extract many a valuable discovery.

In a late number of the Almanack of the Board of Longitude, Monsieur Arago published a curious theory upon thunder, citing many interesting facts; the only means of conferring popularity on knowledge, which, in its severer garb, is too often banished to the lecture-room. The influence of storms upon animate as well as inanimate bodies, is incontestable; [Pg 268] for which of us has not felt or witnessed the effects? Previous to the approach of the storm, the depression of the air is perceptible upon our limbs and spirits; and on beholding the dejected, languid, and uneasy demeanour of the animal species, it might be supposed that so powerful a sensation would be more oppressive to ourselves, were it not restrained by reason. A similar sensation is experienced in a far higher degree, previous to the shock of an earthquake.

With the first drops of rain of a thunder storm, however, we experience relief. Both animal and vegetable substances become decomposed during a storm. Objects formed of goat or sheep-skin give out a nauseous smell. White paper and other substances have been known to become covered with spots of various hues. Oxen killed by lightning are unfit for use, so nauseous and black is the flesh. Dairy-maids place a nail under the vessels containing the milk, to prevent it turning, as well as under a hen which is sitting. Remote approaches towards the conductor!

Of the phenomena which signalize storms, nothing is more remarkable than the repugnance of the electric fluid for silk. The steel ornaments of a purse have been known to become twisted by the fluid, while the silk remained uninjured. A covering of silk is accordingly the [Pg 269] surest preservative. But it is a curious fact that to none of the insect species is a thunder-storm more fatal than to the silk-worm; as the silk-growers know to their cost.

The protective power of the laurel is now known to be fabulous; the laurel tree being as much a conductor as any other.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

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If any thing could excuse the exercise of arbitrary power on the part of a Government, it would surely be in the act of compelling parents to vaccinate their children; but the aversion to vaccination being still only too common among certain classes of the people. Yet surely the law which punishes parents for ill-usage of their children, might be extended to punish their leaving these helpless creatures exposed to the infection of pain and disfigurement? Jenner is decidedly one of the greatest benefactors of the human race; for the vast increase of population in the different countries of Europe is ascribed, by many political economists, to the safeguard of vaccination, which has preserved more lives since its introduction, than the terrible wars of the present century have destroyed.

In England, this admirable discovery was far more readily adopted than in France; where, however versatile in fashions and governments, any improvement tending to benefit the [Pg 271] human race is slowly and cautiously accepted. In the reign of Louis XIV, the introduction of yeast in the making of bread met with general opposition; and it required the interference of the legislature to secure its adoption. The introduction of bark and emetics was also attended with violent opposition; and inoculation introduced from Turkey into Western Europe by Lady Mary Wortley Montague, found great difficulty in establishing itself in France.

It was not, however, surprising that parents should hesitate about giving their children a loathsome disease; before it became certified by long experience that the virulence of the disorder was considerably lessened by preparation; so as to secure a mother against the terrible self-reproaches arising from the loss of a child under the inoculated malady.

In England, more particularly in the county of Gloucester, from time immemorial cows were subject to a contagious disease, which infected the hands of the milkmaids, who were observed never to suffer from the small-pox. This surmise being confirmed by experiment, Dr. Jenner established himself in the county of Gloucester; where, by inoculating people with vaccine matter, he secured them against the small-pox.

So far from turning his discovery to pecuniary account, as most others would have done, [Pg 272] Jenner nobly proclaimed it to mankind, calling upon all philantrophists to share his triumph.

The Duke de Rochefauld-Liancourt having witnessed the effects of vaccination in England, introduced it into France, and did more for its propagation than the slow deliberations of the Parisian Schools of Medicine. Dr. Pinel, however, tried experiments at the Hospital of the Salpétrière, with perfect success; while Dr. Aubert was despatched by Government to England to report upon the subject. The result was favourable. Matter was imported from England in the month of May, 1800, when thirty-eight children were vaccinated at the Hospital of La Pitié; and commissions were instantly instituted throughout France. Jenner had, however, his opponents. In London, it was denounced from the pulpit, as an infringement on the dispensation of Providence; and in France, Doctors Vaume, Chapon and others pronounced vaccination to be injurious to the human constitution, and capable of reducing man to the condition of a brute, by the introduction of animal virus into the blood. As if we resembled a calf or sheep the more for having swallowed a mutton chop or veal cutlet.

With a few rare exceptions, vaccination has proved a security against the small-pox, and the practice ought consequently to become universal. But old women are still to be found with [Pg 273] instances of children who have died of convulsions after vaccination; as if that were the origin of their illness and death.

Among the lower orders, a prejudice prevails that an inferior kind of vaccine matter is provided for them; and whenever their children exhibit symptoms of disease or deformity, they comfort their self-love by attributing it to the influence of vaccination. “Such maladies were unknown in their families, till the madness of introducing matter from the body of a stranger into that of their child conveyed also the germs of disease.”

CHAPTER XL. [Pg 274]

PRECOCIOUS AND CLEVER CHILDREN.

It is a common observation respecting children, “that such or such a child is too clever to live;” and though abundance of precocious children have grown up, and into very ordinary men, it stands to reason that the premature development of any particular quality in an extraordinary degree, must exhaust the subject upon whom it operates. Gardeners thin the superfluous shoots on trees, that those remaining may attain their perfect growth. It would be difficult, perhaps, to pursue this system with children who manifest supernaturally precocious capacities. But when such cases present themselves, the vanity of parents often

serves to forward an evil result. The parents of children of genius usually stimulate instead of checking the impulses requiring restraint; thus increasing the already existing exhaustion. Proud of their infantine prodigy, which, in humble life, becomes the object of [Pg 275] some abominable speculation, nothing can be more lamentable than the exhibition of these interesting little beings, carried about from place to place, obtaining a notoriety of the most injurious nature, and often let out for hire to some able speculator. The exhibitionist, bent upon realising the largest profit in the shortest time, and, reckless as to the source, having attained his end, cares not whether the child perish in misery; and the laws, so severe upon the poor hucksters in our streets, unprovided with a licence, sanction these homicidal speculations!

Baillet mentions one hundred and sixty-three children endowed with extraordinary talents, among whom few arrived at an advanced age. The two sons of Quintilian, so vaunted by their father, did not reach their tenth year. Hermogenes, who at the age of fifteen, taught rhetoric to Marcus Aurelius, who triumphed over the most celebrated rhetoricians of Greece, did not die, but at twenty-four, lost his faculties and forgot all he had previously acquired. Pica di Mirandola died at thirty-two; Johannes Secundus at twenty-five; having at the age of fifteen composed admirable Greek and Latin verses, and become profoundly versed in jurisprudence and letters. Pascal, whose genius developed itself at ten years old, did not attain the third of a century.

In 1791, a child was born at Lubeck, named Henri Heinekem, whose precocity was [Pg 276] miraculous. At ten months of age, he spoke distinctly; at twelve, learnt the Pentateuch by rote, and at fourteen months, was perfectly acquainted with the Old and New Testaments. At two years of age, he was as familiar with Ancient History as the most erudite authors of antiquity. Sanson and Danville only could compete with him in geographical knowledge; Cicero would have thought him an “alter ego,” on hearing him converse in Latin; and in modern languages, he was equally proficient. This wonderful child was unfortunately carried off in his fourth year. According to a popular proverb—“the sword wore out the sheath.”

The American family of the Davisons, whose Memoirs have been recently before the public, afford two melancholy instances in point. Nevertheless, the duty of every created being is to give the most ample development to the predispositions conferred on him by his Creator; and this is certainly to be accomplished without injury to the human frame. The mission of woman is the perpetuation of the human race; and the statistical table of all countries demonstrate that fruitful women have been remarkable for their longevity. On the other hand, the tables of Blair and others prove that unmarried women, whether spinsters or nuns, are shorter lived than matrons. As regards the influence of an excessive exercise of [Pg 277] the intellect on the life of man, we can quote many instances of longevity among the most eminent of ancient or modern times.

Hippocrates, the greatest physician the world has ever seen, died at the age of one hundred and nine, in the island of Cos, his native country. Galen, the most illustrious of his successors, reached the age of one hundred and four. The three sages of Greece, Solon, Thales, and Pittacus, lived for a century. The gay Democritus outlived them by two years. Zeno wanted only two years of a century when he died. Diogenes ten years more; and Plato died at the age of ninety-four, when the eagle of Jupiter is said to have borne his soul to Heaven. Xenophon, the illustrious warrior and historian, lived ninety years. Polemon and Epicharmus ninety-seven; Lycurgus eighty-five; Sophocles more than a hundred. Gorgias entered his hundred and eighth year; and Asclepiades, the physician, lived a century and a half. Juvenal lived a hundred years; Pacuvius and Varro but one year less. Carneades died at ninety; Galileo at sixty-eight; Cassini at ninety-eight; and Newton at eighty-five. In the last century, Fontenelle expired in his ninety-ninth year; Buffon in his eighty-first; Voltaire in his eighty-fourth. In the present century, Prince Talleyrand, Goethe, Rogers, and Niemcewicz are remarkable instances. The Cardinal du Belloy lived nearly a century; and Marshal [Pg 278] Moncey lately terminated a glorious career at eighty-five.

Voltaire, though not a juvenile prodigy, was still young when he achieved his brilliant reputation. At seventeen, he wrote the poem of La Ligue, which afterwards became the Henriade; and at nineteen, produced the tragedy of Œdipus. His constitution was then far from strong; and his correspondence attests his frequent sufferings. No man, perhaps, ever made a larger demand on his faculties. Yet his head may be said to have survived the other members of his body, the extremities of which were long insensible; his body reduced to a skeleton, his stomach rejecting all sustenance, while to the last moment, his spirit gave proofs of wit and genius. Among the precocious children who survived to maturity, though of weakly health, were Alexander Pope and Dr. Johnson, both of whom may be said to have “lisped in numbers.”

Liceti, the son of a Genoese physician, came into the world only a few inches long, and it was thought impossible he could live. His father, however, gave him the name of Fortunio, a singular selection, considering the circumstances of the event, and placed him in an oven of even temperature, under the care of an attentive nurse; and in the course of a few months, Fortunio Liceti differed in nothing from children born in the usual manner. The early years [Pg 279] of this child passed much as that of others, except that he evinced signs of superior intelligence. At nineteen, he wrote a “Treatise on the Soul;” and in the course of a life of seventy-nine years, embellished the literature of his country with eighty works, bearing the stamp of great erudition.

Marshal Richelieu was a child of untimely birth; and so delicate in frame, as to be considered impossible to rear, though carefully wrapped in cotton. Yet he lived to the age of eighty-five! Without intending to set up Richelieu as a first-rate man, or defend his licentiousness, we cannot deny him a prominent place among the distinguished Frenchmen of the last century; being as much the representative of the tone and manners of the great world, as Voltaire of the wit, or Mirabeau of the eloquence of the country.

CHAPTER XLI.

[Pg 280]

EDUCATION OF CHILDREN.

Neither the illustrious preceptor of Alexander, nor the amiable preceptor of the Duke of Burgundy, nor all the professors of the universities of England and France, ever effected so much in the way of education, as that unrecognised president of all universities and public schools—Example!—From the hour of their birth, children begin to imitate. Their first words are mimicries of what they hear pronounced before them. Hence the origin of different idioms and enunciations. Montaigne made Latin the mother tongue of his son, by surrounding him with persons who spoke no other language, and even a nurse who spoke Latin.

The intellect of children expands long before they have the power of expressing their ideas. Physicians have affirmed that children have been known to die of jealousy, before they were old enough to express their sensations. Excessive notice of another child, or seeming neglect [Pg 281] of themselves, has been found to induce a state of languor, and hasten their end. Young children suffer doubly in illness, from the incapability of expressing their pain.

Their language being formed upon our own, and their conduct framed upon our own, the duty of placing desirable examples before them is sufficiently evident; yet we frequently punish them for faults of which the first lesson was given by ourselves. In many conditions of life, however, parents are forced to delegate to other hands the care of their progeny. The labouring poor, for instance, cannot constantly watch over them. While the rich wantonly confide their infants to the care of menial hands, the poor trust them to any which God is pleased to send to their aid. It is even more essential to avoid giving bad examples to children than to offer them good. Yet how often are family dissensions and recriminations exposed to their observation! A man and wife living ill together, who so far forget themselves as to quarrel before their children, create a preference and partizanship which must diminish the respect equally due to both parents. In humbler life, abusive language often ends with blows; and what must be the effect of such scenes on the tender mind of infancy?

The presence of children on such occasions, when proved before the magistracy, ought to be [Pg 282] considered an aggravation of the offence against the law. Fathers and mothers by upbraiding each other in presence of their children, often beget impressions which all their future representations are unable to eradicate; and of what avail to the comfort of parents the brilliant accomplishments and attractive manners of their children, if a son have been taught to disparage his father, or a daughter to think ill of her mother! Often do children so young as to appear deficient in observation, receive vague but indelible impressions, afterwards recalled by a retrospective view; when the past appears clear and free from the vapours which veiled it from our earlier comprehension.

Among the lower orders, if a poor man be laborious, his son is usually the same. But the son of a father who ill-uses the mother, is pretty sure to turn out an idler and a dunce in childhood, and, in riper years, a ruffian.

CHAPTER XLII.

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PREJUDICES OF THE FRENCH.

The prevailing weakness of the French, collectively and individually, is to esteem themselves the type and model of perfection; the standard by which the universe ought to be regulated. An Italian author once asserted that the face of man was not made after that of God; but that the face of the Creator was to be imagined after that of man. The French consider all that resembles them, right: all that differs from them, wrong. This prejudice entitles foreigners to

laugh at them, whether justly or not. The word "*fat*" appears to have been exclusively invented for the nation. Vain, presumptuous, haughty, disdainful men are to be found in all countries; but *fatuité* is the peculiar attribute of Frenchmen; nor does any other language possess an equivalent term.

The French, unhesitatingly, pronounce themselves the most polished nation of the universe; and Paris, the capital of the civilized world,—the city of arts, sciences, elegance of manners, [Pg 284] and refinement. In Paris only, does genius receive due homage,—merit, encouragement,—or the mind its full development. But the temple they have erected to their national vanity, has begun to totter upon its flimsy foundation.

Notwithstanding their assumed pre-eminence, no nation is more prone to imitate the customs, usages, fashions, and forms of government of others. Just as the Romans placed the Gods of their defeated enemies in their Pantheon, the French, under Napoleon, brought back the customs of foreign nations.

For twelve centuries, the French possessed a system of government of their own; but they decided, at length, to adopt that of the English. A Revolution having occurred in England, and a King been beheaded in London, an analogous event appeared indispensable; and a King of France, consequently, ended his reign on the scaffold. In early times, one legislative chamber was considered sufficient; but as there existed two in England, their national vanity could not rest till gratified by a similar number. In all this, there is little to support the vaunted superiority of the French.

Till the close of the last century, the French wore what is still termed, on the continent, the French costume, or *habit Français*, with bags and swords, which in England we call a court-dress. But the English having laid aside these inconvenient appendages in favour of hunting [Pg 285] and riding coats, the latter were quickly adopted by the Parisians under the name of *redingotte*.

The Lord Cadogan of Marlborough's time, having found it convenient to double up his queue, and bind it with a bow of black ribbon, the whole French army adopted the fashion; and his Lordship's name became immortalized in France by "*les perruques à la Cadogan*."

The strong horses of Normandy required an easy but somewhat solid kind of saddle, the form of which had prevailed from the time of Louis XIV. But the English using a lighter and smaller kind, it was adopted in preference; and certain moral philosophers who proceeded to England to study the laws, manners, and system of government, having remarked in addition that the English treated their horses as Alcibiades did his dog, the horses on the other side the channel were forthwith anglicised by the abbreviation of their tails.

On the arrival of the Bourbons and the English in France, in 1814, the long waists and cottage-bonnets of the ladies were made the ground-work of innumerable caricatures. Yet a few years afterwards, generally they were adopted! This Anglomania has been as much a matter of reproach to the French for centuries past; as, in England, the preference of the [Pg 286] English ladies for French goods and manufactures. A serious source of discussion between Napoleon and Josephine was her rage for English fashions.

In the early part of the Revolution, the Duke of Orleans made frequent excursions to England; in one of which he purchased a sword hilt of steel, the execution of which was admirable. On his return to Paris, he exhibited it to a celebrated steel worker, challenging him to produce its equal; on which, taking up the hilt, the man pointed out his own name to the Prince, as the manufacturer of the article, which had been exported to London.

During the brilliant campaigns of Field-Marshal Suwarow, the form of his hat and boots was copied by the military men of France; and when Bolivar and Murillo were ascertained to wear hats of different dimensions, the French partizans of the two chiefs assumed on one part, broad-brimmed Spanish hats, on the other, a narrower shape.

When the Russians came to Paris at the Restoration, another change took place. Instead of the boots worn to protect the legs from the mud, the wide trowsers of the Russians made to cover their boots, in consideration of the bitterness of their climate, were instantly adopted by the nation which pronounces itself the arbiter of Europe in matters of taste. The padded chests of the Russian uniforms, also worn as a defence against the weather, were imitated in [Pg 287] defiance of climate and common sense.

Previous to the arrival of the Russians in Paris, smoking was limited to the operative classes, and soldiers who had fought in the German campaign. But from the moment the Russians began to smoke in the open street, the capital so famed for elegance, became polluted with the smell of tobacco. A modern man of fashion can no more dispense with his cigar-case than Bayard with his sword; and in imitation of the Spanish women, the fashionable Parisian ladies, known by the name of *lionnes*, have taken to smoking.

In order to mark their estimation of the Swedes, when they elected to be their Prince, Bernadotte, who is a Frenchman, they thought to do them the highest honour by calling them the French of the north. Two noblemen, the one an aide-de-camp of Napoleon, the other of the Emperor Alexander, having made acquaintance at Tilsit, the former observed, with the intention of paying a compliment: "You might really be taken for a Frenchman!" to which the Russian, indignant at his rudeness, replied: "Depend upon it you could never pass

for a Russian!”

It is a favourite vaunt of the braggarts of France, that their children are born soldiers. “Stamp upon the soil of France, and myriads of warriors will start up!” says one of their popular writers.

In answer to this boast, observe the results of the drawing for the conscription, when the most trifling bodily defects are put forth to secure exemption from military service!—Nothing can exceed the despair of those who draw what is called “a bad number;” though a military career presents nearly the same advantages to a working man as any other to which he may devote himself. [Pg 288]

The self-sufficiency of the nation stands perpetually self-convicted; and it is now proverbial in Europe to “be as great a boaster as a Frenchman.”

CHAPTER XLIII. [Pg 289]

MONSTROUS BIRTHS.

The attachment existing betwixt animals of different kinds is an undoubted fact. Dogs have been known to take kittens under their protection during the absence, or after the death of the parent cat. Most people who have been at the Jardin des Plantes, must have noticed the affection evinced by the lion for the little dog that shares his cage. Two horses and an ass having fed from the same rack during a period of fourteen years, on the death of the ass, his two companions refused food and died. These inclinations are probably the result of the familiarity with mankind produced by domestication, which destroys their natural instincts.

Parrots, starlings, jays, and magpies, do not talk in their wild state; nor would a dog, or squirrel, of its free will, have turned a wheel.

In a Norman farm, so singular an affection subsisted between a hen and a cat attached to the barn-yard, that the cat was frequently seen sitting upon the nest during the absence of her friend; and the eggs thus hatched produced a hybrid race of fowl and cat—a fact certified by an eminent Norman naturalist, Dr. Vimond, at the close of the last century. Towards the beginning of the present, there was exhibited in the Rue St. Honoré, a mastiff bitch having a litter of two puppies and two cats, which she had brought into the world at a birth. [Pg 290]

The ancients frequently speak of monstrous progeny. Besides the famous Minotaur of Crete, Pliny relates that a Roman lady, named Alcippa, produced a young elephant, and that a female slave brought forth a serpent. Julius Obsequens describes two Italian women, who, in the middle of the fifteenth century, produced on the same day, the one a cat, the other a dog. In such instances, dogs and cats seem to enjoy the preference. A Swiss woman, however, is asserted to have produced a hare; a Thuringian, a toad. Bayle speaks of a mare which produced a calf; and of a woman, who became the mother of a black cat, which was burnt by command of the Holy Inquisition in the belief that it was the offspring of the devil. These marvels have been chiefly attested by monks and physicians; but there is scarcely an instance in which any distinguished naturalist has been able to confirm the fact. [Pg 291]

During the thirteenth century, in three different places, at Wittenberg, Misnia, and Villefranche, children were born without heads. They died upon coming into the world; but not without having exhibited symptoms of life.

Carpi, the anatomist, mentions a child born in 1729, in whose head was found nothing but clear water without a vestige of brain. On the other hand, children have come into the world with a double volume of brain. In 1684, a woman gave birth to twins, of which the first-born survived only a few hours, while the second exhibited a double head, having four eyes, two noses, two tongues, but only two ears.

The annals of anatomy furnish many such instances; and the cases of the Siamese twins, and of the unfortunate sisters of Sgöny, are too well known to need description. But if all the instances on record were recapitulated, these blunders of nature are but as a grain of sand compared with the regularity of her productions through an infinity of ages.

The idea of individuals having a double sex, created probably by Plato in the fable of the Androgyne, the most ingenious fiction bequeathed to us by antiquity, was for ages supposed to have its foundation in fact; and every now and then, the irregularities of a Chevalier d’Eon revive the chimera, to which anatomists oppose a decided negative. The beautiful statue of the Florentine hermaphrodite at the Louvre is as much a chimerical being as a sphinx. [Pg 292]

The Memoirs of the Chevalier d’Eon, published in America, declare one of the most illustrious dynasties of modern Europe to be his descendents; an assertion easily disproved

by a comparison of the date of his visit to Russia with that of the birth of the Emperor Paul.

The Albinos were formerly considered a distinct race. They were sought in the olden time as favourite appendages to the Courts of African and Asiatic monarchs. Pliny places them in Albania, probably from the similitude of name; but does not state that they constituted a nation. His description of them, however, perfectly agrees with those of modern times; having white hair, and eyes which he describes as resembling those of a partridge. The Albinos are, in truth, an exceptional race; and their peculiarities are seldom found to be hereditary.

The morbid longings of women during pregnancy afford many remarkable facts. Goulard relates, that in the neighbourhood of Andernach, on the Rhine, a woman experienced such a longing for the flesh of her husband, that she murdered him, ate one half of the body and salted the other; when her appetite being appeased, she confessed the deed to two friends of her husband. [Pg 293]

In the Helvetic Chronicles it is related, that in the time of Martin IV., an illustrious lady of Rome, an object of affection to the supreme head of the Church, gave birth to a son having the semblance of a wild beast; which monstrous production was ascribed to the passion of his Holiness for paintings of animals, numbers of which ornamented his palace, till the continual view of such objects influenced the mind and body of his fair inmate.

A black child is generally believed to have been born to Marie Thérèse, the wife of Louis XIV., in consequence of a little negro page in her service having started from a hiding-place, and stumbled over her dress early in her pregnancy. This child was educated at the Convent of Moret, near Fontainebleau, where she took the veil, and where, till the epoch of the Revolution, her portrait was shown.

Mallebranche has assigned the greatest scope of imagination to women under such circumstances. He mentions one, who having been present at the breaking of a criminal on the wheel, gave birth to a child whose limbs were broken at the exact places where those of the criminal were fractured. Scarcely an anatomical museum but contains monstrous productions. The question unsolved is the influence of the imagination of the mother in producing these aberrations of nature.

CHAPTER XLIV. [Pg 294]

THE ICHNEUMON AND THE HALCYON.

Buffon assumes that the Ichneumon has been brought to a state of domesticity. But he probably generalized from a single instance. The Pacha of Egypt has a tame lion; and many other instances might be cited. But the lion cannot be regarded as reduced to a domestic animal.

According to Pliny, the ichneumon was an object of veneration among the Egyptians. So also was the crocodile; these two determined enemies being equally objects of adoration. By the ancients, the ichneumon was said to watch the moment of the crocodile’s sleep; when, finding the monster’s jaws open, it instantly crept in, and having devoured the bowels, made its way out by the way it entered.

Denon has given us the following account of the ichneumon in his Travels in Egypt.

“The ichneumon is seen lying upon the reeds of the Nile, in the neighbourhood of the villages, to which it repairs in search of poultry and eggs. The supposed antagonism of the ichneumon and crocodile, the one eating the eggs of the other, and the former creeping down the throat of the latter, is pure invention. These two animals do not dwell in the same regions. Crocodiles are not known in Lower, nor ichneumons in Upper Egypt; so that there can be no grounds for the prejudice which has existed twenty centuries:—for Pliny, himself, probably handed down a tradition! [Pg 295]

The fable of the halcyon is so charming, that it ought to have been founded on fact. But Ovid was a better poet than naturalist.

To the power of tranquillizing the tempest, the halcyon was supposed to add the gift of foretelling good or bad weather. By degrees, writers of fiction endowed its feathers with the power of rendering silk proof against the sting of insects, of yielding wealth and harmony, and conferring grace and beauty on the wearers. The halcyon deposits its eggs on the sea-shore, on the banks of lakes and rivers; and its breeding season is that when the air is most calm and serene; but its power of controlling the elements is wholly fabulous.

CHAPTER XLV. [Pg 296]

SORCERERS AND MAGICIANS.

In the works of St. Augustin, we are informed that there existed in his time in Italy, women possessed of the power attributed by the poets to Circe, who transformed men into beasts of burthen, and compelled them to bear their baggage. St. Augustin mentions that a priest named Præstantius unfortunately meeting one of those women, was changed into a mule, and compelled to bear a trunk on his back; and that it was only when she had no further occasion for his services, he was allowed to resume his gown and band.

Are we to infer from this passage, that one of the greatest minds that ever enlightened the Church believed in this species of transformation? Certainly not! The works of St. Augustin are not to be literally interpreted.

The hyperbole simply implies that there are in Italy women whose charms are so powerful, [Pg 297] and whose allurements so dangerous, that men who give way to their influence, ceasing to be men, are reduced to the condition of brutes, and exercise the most degrading labour. As to the priest Præstantius, his name contains the key to the mystery; and he was probably one of the minor Canons of the Church converted into a slave to do the errands of some attractive dame.

This version of the passage of St. Augustin, so often cited for twelve centuries by the believers in magic, was simply an exhortation against female seduction to the laity and clergy of his time. It has proved, however, no small advantage to mountebanks to be backed by the authority of the illustrious name of St. Augustin!

The annals of the Jesuits abound in terrible histories of atonement made at the stake for imputed sorcery. The following instance is related by Dom Calmet. Charles IV., Duke of Lorraine, had in his service a valet-de-chambre, named Desbordes, who was accused of having hastened, by the art of sorcery, the death of the Princess Mary of Lorraine, mother to the Duke.

“Charles IV. conceived suspicions against Desbordes, from the period of his having furnished a grand banquet given by the Duke to a hunting party at a moment’s notice: [Pg 298] Desbordes having made no other preparatives than to open a chest, having three trays, upon which were three courses ready prepared. During another hunting party, Desbordes reanimated three criminals suspended from a gibbet, and commanded them to make obeisance to the Duke; having done which, he bade them hang themselves again. Another time, he made the figures in a piece of tapestry come down and join in the dance. Charles IV., alarmed at these supernatural feats, eventually brought Desbordes to trial; and he was condemned and executed as a magician for mere acts of sleight of hand.

The real cause of his condemnation was the enmity of the court-physicians of Lorraine; whom he had irritated by the disappointment of their predictions touching the death of the Princess Mary; for had his judges really believed in his power of restoring the dead to life, their sentence of execution would have been absurd.

The most learned men of times famed for their learning have sometimes condescended to confirm these popular errors. Baronius affirms the bridge of the Spiritus Sanctus, in Rome, to have been erected by a glance from the eye of a child of twelve years old, named Benezet; and his assertion is founded upon five Papal bulls.

Paulus Jovius, a man of unquestionable erudition, confirms the popular legend concerning [Pg 299] the black dog of Cornelius Agrippa; stating that, when on his death-bed at Lyons, he uttered dreadful imprecations against his faithful attendant, who was supposed by the vulgar to be a familiar spirit disguised under the form of a cur; saying, “Away with thee wretched beast, through whom I am lost to all eternity!” On which the dog precipitated itself into the Saône, and appeared no more. Unfortunately for the historian, Agrippa died at Grenoble, and not at Lyons, so that the Saône is rather far fetched. But those who believe in familiar spirits are apt to be loose in their notions of geography.

The work of James I., upon Demonology, is one of the most curious records of the superstition of his time, of which the feats of Nicholas Hopkins, the witch-finder, afford so cruel an evidence. The royal author would, perhaps, have been better employed in seeing a more enlightened education bestowed upon his ill-advised son, than in perpetuating his own credulity.

The Memoirs of the Cardinal de Richelieu admit his belief in witchcraft. In his time, it was an advantage to a Minister of State to have at his disposal accusations of a mysterious crime, where disculpation was next to impossible. Urbain Grandier, the priest, who was condemned to death for allowing the nuns of Loudun to communicate with the devil, was one [Pg 300] among many victims to the darkness of the public mind.

By the Parliaments of France, hundreds were burnt for witchcraft in the course of a few months. The shepherds of La Brie alone supplied innumerable victims; as the supposed

authors of all the domestic misfortunes of the district, the murrain that carried off the cattle, and the hooping-cough that carried off the children. Like the old women in Scotland, they were “na canny;” and like them, expiated the prejudice among faggots and tar-barrels. But though we no longer burn for witchcraft, the profession is far from extinct; and in the remote districts of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, there scarcely exists a country magistrate but has had some charge brought before him implying the exercise of witchcraft. The horse-shoe is still seen nailed above the doors of our villages; and fortune-tellers, and spaewives are consulted, in spite of Sunday schools and the Lancastrian system. Not a day passes, but the ordeal of the Bible and key, the Sortes virgiliane of the vulgar, is resorted to in some village of the British empire; but the exorcisms of the school-master will probably drive both witches and witch-finders from the land.

CHAPTER XLVI.

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MALE AND FEMALE.

When the learned Spaniard, Feijoo, was about to decide upon the comparative power and merit of the two sexes, he invoked an angel to descend from Heaven to enlighten his mind; so perplexing did he feel the arguments on both sides.

Rousseau, in comparing the sexes, observes, “as I pursue my investigations, I perceive on all sides affinity—on all sides discrepancy.”

And long may that discrepancy exist. The merit of woman consists in the oppositeness of her qualities to those of the male sex.

To be completely woman, is her perfection; as man is never more perfect than when most completely man. Sybarites and Amazons are alike at variance with nature; and Hercules handling the distaff of Omphale could not be more absurd than Omphale wielding the club of Hercules.

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In heathen times, and even now, in countries uncivilized by Christianity, the condition of women is of a subordinate and miserable nature. Aristotle was one of the greatest depreciators of women; regarding them as an incomplete production, and at variance with the ends of nature. He fancied that, in a more perfect order of things, only men would be seen on earth. In the tragedies of Euripides, women are treated with unmeasured contempt; and his opinions being embraced by the Greeks, were adopted by the early theologians alluded to by St. Augustin; who pretended that at the day of judgment, God would reform his work, and the dead of both sexes rise again of the masculine gender. In the fifth century, it was agitated in council, whether our Saviour died for women as well as men; nor was it till after the most violent contestation, decided in the affirmative. Mahomet, the most violent opponent of the equality of sexes excluded women from Paradise except in a few favoured instances.

Chivalry was the first defender of the weaker sex.

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At the beginning of the twelfth century, a doctor, named Amauri, of the diocese of Chartres, attempted to renew the doctrine of Aristotle concerning women, declaring them to be imperfect works accidentally proceeding from the hands of God. The Archbishop of Paris, however, convened a council, which declared his doctrine to be heretical; and anathemized Amauri, who having died previous to the decree, his lady was disinterred, and thrown into the common sewer. This proceeding gave much satisfaction to the Parisian populace; but was scarcely necessary to refute the impertinent assertions of Aristotle and his disciple.

It is unnecessary to dwell upon the criticisms, satires, and diatribes, of which women have been the objects,—from Juvenal, to Boileau and Pope; and from Boccaccio and Brantome, to La Fontaine and Byron:—for their champions are, at least, as numerous as their assailants. Among themselves Madame de Genlis in France, and Mary Wolstonecroft in England, have fought a good fight in favour of the equality of the sexes.

Mallebranche, one of the writers who has most profoundly studied the question, accords to women a decided superiority in point of sensibility; but decides them to be equally inferior to the male sex in point of abstract ideas. Arguing upon the difference of organisation, and conceiving the brain to be the seat of intellectual operations, he shows that the brain of women is of a more feeble organization, and less extended than that of men; and concludes, from the diameter of their head being less, that their minds must maintain the same proportion. This opinion is based upon the craniological, or phrenological system.

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Mallebranche agrees with Dr. Gall in the belief that the seat of intelligence lies essentially in the brain, and that the amount of our faculties is proportioned to the volume of that organ: that stupid animals have scarcely any brain, and sagacious animals much; that no animal can vie in proportion with that of man; and that among men, idiots are remarkable for

deficiency of brain. On this point, the learned and the ignorant fully coincide;—a fool or idiot, having been always styled a brainless fellow.

The Cretins of the Valais, and the Pyrenees, who have very diminutive heads, are alike devoid of intellect, and suffer from the same affliction. In the intellectual physiology of Domangeon, he relates, that, of two maniacs under his care, a young person suddenly bereft of reason had a head incredibly small; while an old woman, similarly afflicted, had a brain no larger than that of a child of three years old.

Experiment has now proved the brain to be the seat of human intelligence. The celebrated Dr. Richerand, attended a patient whose brain was accidentally exposed, and anxious to convince himself that the brain was really the seat of intelligence, he pressed that of his patient with his hand, when the intellectual powers immediately ceased, and upon withdrawing his hand, they recovered their faculties.

Those who still deny the brain to be the seat of intelligence, instance, in support of their theory, the existence of reason after the ossification of the brain; and of children, born deficient in spinal marrow. Duverney exhibited to the Academy of Sciences at Paris, the head of an ox nearly petrified, notwithstanding which, it had never betrayed the least uneasiness, or any unusual symptoms. [Pg 305]

It is certain that considerable portions of the brain have been removed from a living subject, in cases of accident, without prejudice to the intellectual faculties. But the lobes being double, a portion may be cut away without affecting its power; as in losing an eye or an ear, the faculty of seeing and hearing remains.

All this, however, is a digression from the fact asserted; that the brain of a woman weighs less by one sixteenth than that of a man! The mean weight of the brain of a man is estimated at three pounds; and it is found to be two pounds thirteen ounces in that of a woman, from which it may be inferred that man is a sixteenth part more intelligent than woman. It may, however, be argued that this is only accordant with the other comparative proportions of the human frame. The stature of woman is a sixteenth less than that of man, and the brain ought surely to be in proportion to the stature.

On this point, J. J. Rousseau observes, “A perfect woman and perfect man ought to be as dissimilar in form and face, as in soul. A well-conditioned man should not be less than five feet and a half in height, with a sonorous voice and well-bearded chin.” But considering the number of men who expend many hours a day in adorning and perfuming their persons, and lounging upon a sofa or beside a work-table, it is not wonderful that women should be tempted to consider themselves somewhat nearer on a par with those who renounce the manly attributes of their sex. [Pg 306]

In establishing between man and woman certain relations and differences, Providence has clearly distinguished the condition of the two sexes. To the stronger, he assigned rude labour and the tillage of the earth; to the weaker, domestic duties, and the rearing of progeny. The one has an out-door, the other an in-door existence; and by the duties of the mother, the position of the slighter sex is distinctly pointed out.

It would appear as if the comparative merit of the sexes were influenced by the effect of climate; the Salique-law still prevailing in several of the most civilized countries of Europe, in spite of the glorious reigns of Elizabeth and Anne in England, and Catherine in Russia; and the living example of three female sovereigns on the throne. But it may be added that in two of the countries where woman is excluded from the throne, she exercises in private life fourfold the influence assigned her in England, Spain, or Portugal, where she is admitted to the privileges of supreme power. [Pg 307]

CHAPTER XLVII. [Pg 308]

MINOR SUPERSTITIONS.

One of the most prevalent minor superstitions has its origin in a religious influence. Friday is regarded as the most unlucky day of the week, from being that of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. People of all classes object to commencing an undertaking, or a journey, on Friday; and the Calabrian brigands forbear to assassinate on that day, however difficult to postpone the premeditated crime till the following morning. They feel convinced that a murder committed on a Friday will be overtaken by the hand of justice. In Paris, the average quantity of new pieces produced at the different theatres is from a hundred and fifty to two hundred; and for the last thirty years, not one of these has been produced for the first time on a Friday.

Boileau, in one of his Satires, places among the number of human weaknesses, the superstition which makes

Twelve grouped together, fear an other one.

The origin of this sentiment dates from the Last Supper; when, thirteen being at table, one of them betrayed and another denied his master, and “went and hanged himself;” and a prejudice has ever since prevailed that out of every thirteen dipping together in the dish, one must fall a victim before the end of the year. The probability that one out of every thirteen may die in the course of the year, exceeds but little the usual chances of mortality. [Pg 309]

The dislike which many entertain of seeing a knife and fork crossed on a plate, has also reference to a religious objection as an emblem of the crucifixion. Yet it sometimes obtains ascendancy over unbelievers. Frederick the Great disliked seeing a knife and fork crossed so much, that he never failed to uncross them. Others dislike to see three candles lighted; an omen borrowed from the ancients, who regarded them as symbolic of the Fates, the Furies, and the three heads of Cerberus.

CHAPTER XLVIII. [Pg 310]

SOMNAMBULISM.

“Dreams are the interludes of a busy fancy,” say the copybooks; and in some instances they appear to excite in the body impulses equally active.

Condillac, the mathematician, when surprised by sleep in the midst of his abstruse calculations, often found that, on awaking, the solution of a problem presented itself spontaneously to his mind, as though he had been working in his sleep.

But a more familiar instance of somnambulism is that of a deceased Hampshire Baronet.

This gentleman was nearly driven to distraction by the fact that, every night, he went to bed in a shirt, and every morning awoke naked, without the smallest trace of the missing garment being discovered.

Hundreds of shirts disappeared in this manner; and as there was no fire in his room, it was impossible to account for the mystery. The servants believed their master to be mad; and even he began to fancy himself bewitched. In this conjuncture, he implored an intimate friend to sleep in the room with him; and ascertain by what manner of mysterious midnight visitant his garment was so strangely removed. The friend, accordingly, took up his station in the haunted chamber; and lo! as the clock struck one, the unfortunate Baronet, who had previously given audible intimation of being fast asleep, rose from his bed, rekindled with a match the candle which had been extinguished, deliberately opened the door, and quitted the room. His astonished friend followed; saw him open in succession a variety of doors, pass along several passages, traverse an open court, and eventually reach the stable-yard; where he divested himself of his shirt, and disposed of it in an old dung heap, into which he thrust it by means of a pitch fork. Having finished this extraordinary operation, without taking the smallest heed of his friend who stood looking on, and plainly saw that he was walking in his sleep, he returned to the house, carefully reclosed the doors, re-extinguished the light, and returned to bed; where the following morning he awoke, as usual, stripped of his shirt! [Pg 311]

The astonished eye-witness of this extraordinary scene, instead of apprizing the sleep-walker of what had occurred, insisted that the following night, a companion should sit up with him; choosing to have additional testimony to the truth of the statement he was about to make; and the same singular events were renewed, without the slightest change or deviation. The two witnesses, accordingly, divulged all they had seen to the Baronet; who, though at first incredulous, became of course convinced, when, on proceeding to the stable-yard, several dozens of shirts were discovered; though it was surmised that as many more had been previously removed by one of the helpers, who probably looked upon the hoard as stolen goods concealed by some thief. [Pg 312]

A far stranger circumstance has been related by a highly-beneficed member of the Roman Catholic Church.

In the College where he was educated was a young Seminarist who habitually walked in his sleep; and while in a state of somnambulism, used to sit down to his desk and compose the most eloquent sermons; scrupulously erasing, effacing, or interlining, whenever an incorrect expression had fallen from his pen. Though his eyes were apparently fixed upon the paper when he wrote, it was clear that they exercised no optical functions; for he wrote just as well when an opaque substance was interposed between them and the sheet of paper.

Sometimes, an attempt was made to remove the paper, in the idea that he would write upon the desk beneath. But it was observed that he instantly discerned the change; and sought another sheet of paper, as nearly as possible resembling the former one. At other times, a [Pg 313]

blank sheet of paper was substituted by the bystanders for the one on which he had been writing; in which case, on reading over, as it were, his composition, he was sure to place the corrections, suggested by the perusal, at precisely the same intervals they would have occupied in the original sheet of manuscript.

This young priest, moreover, was an able musician; and was seen to compose several pieces of music while in a state of somnambulism; drawing the lines of the music paper for the purpose with a ruler and pen and ink, and filling the spaces with his notes with the utmost precision, besides a careful adaptation of the words, in vocal pieces.

On one occasion, the somnambulist dreamt that he sprang into a river to save a drowning child; and, on his bed, was seen to imitate the movements of swimming. Seizing the pillow, he appeared to snatch it from the waves and lay it on the shore. The night was intensely cold; and so severely did he appear affected by the imaginary chill of the river, as to tremble in every limb; and his state of cold and exhaustion when roused, was so alarming, that it was judged necessary to administer wine and other restoratives.

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It would require a volume to relate the wonders of artificial somnambulism produced by Animal Magnetism, *i. e.* the somnolency produced in certain organizations by persons constitutionally endowed for the purpose; during which, some patients become so utterly insensible, that surgical operations of the most painful nature, such as amputation, have been performed upon them without their knowledge. Others appear to be transported into a higher sphere; and in a frame of mind described under the name of *clairvoyance*, become capable of reading sealed letters and closed books; of speaking languages of which they are otherwise ignorant, and indicating the name and nature of misunderstood diseases, as well as the means of cure; though at the cessation of the state of somnambulism, all recollection is effaced of the wonders they have performed under its influence.

The mysteries of Magnetic Science are at present so imperfectly understood, and afford so wide a field for scientific argument, that it would be presumptuous to enter further into the subject in a work affecting to treat of errors and superstitions.

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CHAPTER XLIX.

A FEW MORE WORDS ABOUT GHOSTS, VAMPIRES, AND LOUP-GAROUX.

In the winter of 1758, the sacristan of Polliac expired, after a few hours' illness, of a fright produced by the sight of a large white rabbit seated on the grave-stone of a famous poacher recently deceased, as he was crossing the church-yard at midnight after accompanying the curate to administer the last sacrament to a dying parishioner. The mind of this poor fellow, who was a proficient in the ghost stories of the neighbourhood, was probably deeply impressed by the melancholy scene he had been witnessing; which, combined with the desperate character and blasphemous habits of Blaise Rolland, the poacher, induced him to suppose that the soul of the defunct had undergone transformation, or that Satan himself was watching over his grave, in the shape of one of the animals he had so often appropriated to himself.

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The rabbit proved in the sequel to be a tame one escaped from a neighbouring farm. But in the interim, the poor man had fallen a victim to his panic! A more rational being would have inquired of himself for what purpose the Almighty could be supposed to suffer the soul of an obscure poacher to revisit the earth, when we learn from divine writ His refusal to permit the appearance of Dives to his brethren, as a superfluous concession. "If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead!"

Nothing can be more absurd than the functions attributed to ghosts, when we know that the soul, at the moment of its separation from the body, is an impalpable, invisible, substance. Yet this spiritual essence, which eye hath not seen, or ear heard, is supposed to have exercised the power of dragging chains, undrawing curtains, opening doors, ringing bells, uttering groans, articulating reproaches; in the face of the Scriptural Revelation "that the body shall return to the dust, and the spirit unto God who gave it!"

We find in St. John's Gospel, that the souls of mankind in the different mansions of the Almighty, receive after death the reward of deeds done in the body. Is it likely then that they should have leisure or inclination for revisiting their dreary mansion of clay?

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There is one instinct which we are bound to accord to ghosts; *i. e.* a wonderful aptitude for the discovery of cowards! In the ghost-stories of all countries, it is observable that the first impulse of the person addressed by a spectre is to take to his heels. With the exception of the lady of the Beresford family, who is said to have sat and talked theology with her brother, there is no record of a rational conversation between a disembodied spirit and

those of the flesh; for the pretended apparition of Mrs. Veale, is now known to have been an ingenious bookseller's puff of the work of Drelincourt on Death.

In most instances, ghost-stories have their origin in some incident which no one has been at the pains to investigate. In 1746, the public Theatre of Anatomy, in Paris, was disturbed by the sudden frenzy of the porter in care of the dissecting-room; who protested that the spirit of a young man, whose body had been deposited there the preceding day, after having committed suicide by throwing himself into the Seine, had appeared to him in the course of the night, bewailing and lamenting the dreadful consequences of his crime.

Bruhier, the learned Professor of Anatomy, aware of the injurious consequences likely to arise from a report that the theatre was haunted, examined carefully into the details of the [Pg 318] case; when it appeared that this unfortunate young man, having recovered in the course of the night from the state of insensibility in which he was deposited in the dissecting-room, and terrified by the horrible aspect of the spot in which he found himself, among dead bodies, skeletons and anatomical preparations faintly illuminated by the light of a lamp, had dragged himself to the door of the small adjoining room inhabited by the porter, and in faint accents implored his assistance, and described the agonies of his situation.

The porter, roused from his sleep by the appeal of a dead man wrapped in his winding-sheet, instantly lost his senses; and the doors being locked upon them, the exhausted young man, whom Providence had thus fruitlessly restored, sank a victim to cold and exhaustion. His body was discovered stretched on the floor of the dissecting-room near the porter's door. But for the judicious investigations of Monsieur Bruhier, this would have been established as an authentic instance of spectral visitation!

A similar circumstance occurred in Lancashire some years ago.

A lady, the wife of a wealthy squire, died after a protracted illness; and on the evening of her decease, her husband, desirous to pass a solitary hour by the body, sent the nurse who was [Pg 319] watching beside it, out of the room. Before the expiration of an hour, the bell by which the deceased had been in the habit of summoning the nurse, rang violently; and the woman, fancying the unfortunate widower was taken suddenly ill, hurried into the room. He dismissed her angrily, however, protesting that he had not rung. Shortly afterwards, the bell was rung a second time; when the woman observed to one of the servants that she should not attend to the summons, as the gentleman might again repent having summoned her, and dismiss her ungraciously.

"It cannot be my master who is ringing now," replied the footman, "for I have this moment left him in the drawing-room."

And while he was still speaking, the bell of the chamber of death rang a third time—and still more violently than before.

The nurse was now literally afraid to obey the summons: nor was it till several of the servants agreed to accompany her, that she could command sufficient courage. At length, they ventured to open the door, expecting to discover, within, some terrible spectacle.

All, however, was perfectly tranquil; the corpse extended upon the bed under a holland sheet, which was evidently undisturbed. Such, however, was the agitation of the poor nurse, [Pg 320] that nothing would induce her to remain alone with the body; and one of the housemaids accordingly agreed to become her companion in the adjoining dressing-room.

They had not been there many minutes, when the bell again sounded; nor could there be any mistake on the subject, for the bell-wire passing round the dressing-room was in motion, and the servants in the offices could attest the vibration of the bell. The family butler accordingly determined to support the courage of the terrified women by accompanying them back to the dressing-room, in which they were to sit with the door open, so as to command a view of the bed.

These precautions effectually unravelled the mystery! A string had been attached to the bell-pull to enable the sick lady to summon her attendants without changing her position, which, still unremoved, hung down upon the floor; and a favourite kitten, often admitted into the room to amuse the invalid, having entered the chamber unobserved, was playing with the string, which, being entangled in her feet, had produced this general panic.

But for the opportune explanation of this trivial incident, the family mansion would have obtained the notoriety of a haunted house, and probably been deserted!

Such was the case with the Crown Inn at Antwerp, where some years ago, a white spectre, [Pg 321] bearing a lamp in one hand and a bunch of keys in the other, was seen by a variety of travellers passing along a corridor till it disappeared in a particular chamber.

Nothing would satisfy the neighbours that an unfortunate traveller had not been, at some period or other, despatched in that fatal room by one of the previous landlords of the house; and the Crown gradually obtained the name of the Haunted Inn, and ceased to be frequented by its old patrons.

The landlord, finding himself on the brink of ruin, determined to sleep in the haunted-room with a view of proving the groundlessness of the story; and caused his ostler to bear him

company, on pretence of requiring a witness to the absurdity of the report; but in reality, from cowardice. At dead of night, however, just as the two men were composing themselves to sleep in one bed, leaving another which was in the room untenanted, the door flew open, and in glided the white spectre!

Without pausing to ascertain what it might attempt on approaching the other bed, towards which it directed its course, the two men rushed naked out of the room; and by the alarm they created, confirmed, more fully than ever, the evil repute of the house.

Unable longer to sustain the cost of so unproductive an establishment, the poor landlord [Pg 322] advertised for sale the house in which he and his father before him were born and bred. But bidders were as scarce as customers; the inn remaining on sale for nearly a year, during which, from time to time, the spectre reappeared.

At length, an officer of the garrison, who had formerly frequented the house, and recollected the excellent quality of its wine, moved to compassion in favour of the poor host, undertook to clear up the mystery by sleeping in the haunted chamber; nothing doubting that the whole was a trick of some envious neighbour, desirous of deteriorating the value of the freehold in order to become a purchaser.

His offer having been gratefully accepted, the Captain took up his quarters in the fatal room, with a bottle of wine, and a brace of loaded pistols on the table before him; determined to shoot at whatever object might enter the doors.

At the usual hour of midnight, accordingly, when the door flew open and the white spectre bearing a lamp and a bunch of keys made its appearance, he seized his weapons of destruction; when, lo! as his finger was on the point of touching the trigger, what was his panic on perceiving that the apparition was no other than the daughter of his host, a young and pretty girl, evidently walking in her sleep! Preserving the strictest silence, he watched her set down the lamp, place her keys carefully on the chimney-piece, and retire to the [Pg 323] opposite bed, which, as it afterwards proved, she had often occupied during the life-time of her late mother who slept in the room.

No sooner had she thoroughly composed herself, than the officer, after locking the door of the room, went in search of her father and several competent witnesses; including the water-bailiff of the district, who had been one of the loudest in circulating rumours concerning the Haunted Inn. The poor girl was found quietly asleep in bed; and her terror on waking in the dreaded chamber, afforded sufficient evidence to all present of the state of somnambulism in which she had been entranced.

From that period, the spectre was seen no more; probably because the landlord’s daughter removed shortly afterwards to a home of her own.

It has frequently occurred, for ill-disposed persons to profit by the ill-name of a haunted house, as in the case of gangs of coiners and thieves, who raise such reports in order to secure impunity in their haunts. The Palace of the Tuileries is said to be haunted by a Red Man, who regularly appears on the eve of any popular tumult, betiding evil to the Royal Family of France. And appear he will, to the end of time; for those who wish to create a political panic, take care that the apparition shall be periodically renewed. The Palace at Berlin was at one time in danger of having a Weisse Frau, or White Lady, to match with the [Pg 324] Red Man.

During the reign of Frederick I., one of the Princesses, his daughters, being dangerously ill, a white spectre was seen to traverse the royal corridor leading to her apartments; and from that moment, the royal family gave up all hope of her recovery. The following night, the Princess expired; and not a soul about the Court doubted that the fatal event had been announced by the appearance of the White Lady, who, on being challenged by the guard at the head of the staircase had flitted past like a shadow. Great difficulty was found in procuring proper attendants to watch beside the body of her royal highness; when one of the royal Chaplains requested a sight of the depositions of the soldiers by whom the spectre had been accosted.

The mystery was instantly explained. A favourite attendant of the late Princess, who, from the moment of her death had been confined to her bed by severe affliction, happened to have mentioned to the Chaplain that, on quitting her royal highness’s room in search of him, about midnight, the night preceding her mistress’s demise, having a white veil thrown over her head to keep her from the night air, she had been challenged by the sentinel on guard; which being contrary to etiquette in a spot where her person was well known, she had not thought proper to reply. On further investigation, the evidence of the young lady herself was [Pg 325] obtained; when it appeared that the period of her passage in a white night-dress, to and from the Princess’s apartments, corresponded exactly with the apparitions of the White Lady described by the soldiers a happy relief for those who were compelled to inhabit that wing of the palace.

A curious discovery occurred some years ago, at the head-quarters of the French army on the banks of the Rhine. It appears that rumours became suddenly prevalent of the repeated appearance of the spectre of the famous General Marceau, who, was killed at Altenkirchen near Coblentz, in 1796, and buried in the glacis of that city. He was, nevertheless, seen in his uniform as a General of Chasseurs, with a drawn sword in his hand, by several sentries

and patroles; and nothing was discussed in Paris but the nature of the omens to be inferred from this apparition of one of the bravest officers of the Republic.

It happened that the French Commandant of the city of Coblentz was a school-fellow and intimate friend of General Marceau; and either in hopes of once more beholding one so much beloved, or with a view of detecting the impostor who had presumed to trifle with his memory, he marched to the spot pointed out as the usual haunt of the spectre, escorted by a company of grenadiers.

Shortly after his arrival, the ghost made its customary appearance, and by way of military salute, the Commandant ordered his men to “make ready” and “present!” But ere he could add the fatal word “fire,” the ghost was upon its knees, whining piteously; realizing the officer’s shrewd suspicions that it would prove to be one of the boatmen of the Rhine, who had assumed this appalling costume in order to pursue his calling unmolested, of conveying by night to the fortress of Ehrenbreitstein, opposite Coblentz, (at that moment besieged by the French) the provisions and succours so vital to the garrison. In the character of Marceau’s ghost, accordingly, he had nightly paraded the glacis; keeping the coast clear from intrusion, while his boats traversed the river towards the fortress. [Pg 326]

Every one who has travelled in Hungary is familiar with the superstitions of the Willis, or dancing-brides, and the Vampires, or bodies that preserve a posthumous life by the suction of blood from human veins. But the latter superstition has found its way to other countries. A grave having been accidentally opened in a church-yard in Lorraine, about the year 1726, the body of a schoolmaster who, in his lifetime, had been strongly suspected of proficiency in the occult sciences, but who had been dead nearly half a century, was discovered in his coffin, as plump and fresh as though still alive; his eyes bright—his air joyous. [Pg 327]

The whole village having crowded to the spot to behold the miracle, instantly recognised a Vampire in this healthful corpse. Thousands of anecdotes were instantly cited of children lost in the neighbourhood; who, though previously supposed to have fallen into the river, or been destroyed by wolves, had evidently satisfied the dreadful appetites of the dead schoolmaster! In order to keep him, for the future, quiet and harmless in his grave, the villagers drove a stake through the body, after having cut off his head and burnt it on the spot.

Had they persevered in their search, they would doubtless have found reason to fear, from the evidence of the adjoining graves, that their own fathers and mothers were also Vampires. Many soils, particularly those impregnated with nitre, have the property of preserving bodies by converting them to a substance resembling spermaceti. Similar discoveries have been made in several church-yards in England; but luckily without provoking suspicions so preposterous.

In the course of a few years, thanks to the progress of national education, the best authenticated ghost-story going will scarcely find an auditor. Half of the magic rites and mystic wonders of the olden time have found able expositors in our own, in the retort and the crucible. We no longer exorcise a ghost:—we decompose it,—like any other gas. [Pg 328]

The orgies of intemperance used to be a fertile source of apparitions; as in the case of the female spectre which rebuked the infidelity of Lord Lyttleton—and the appearance of Lord Lyttleton himself to his friend Miles Peter Andrews; two *bon vivants*, who were most likely indebted for their nocturnal visions to an extra bottle of claret, and a broiled bone.

A clergyman, who had been struggling hard and sacrificing his nights’ rest for a series of months to a new translation of the Prophecies, took it into his head one night, that three children had entered his room and were seated at his writing table. As there was nothing alarming in such a visitation, he continued to write on; and on retiring to bed, at daybreak, left his young visitors apparently occupying their place. When he woke in the morning, they had of course disappeared.

The illusion was, however, so strong, and recurred so often, that his studies were seriously interrupted; till at last he took the only wise step ever taken by an inveterate ghost-seer:—he consulted an eminent physician.

“You have been overworking yourself,” was the judicious reply, “and unless you have recourse to air and exercise, your nervous system will become seriously impaired. Such cases are by no means rare among men of studious habits. In some instances, the spectrum is created by a disorder of the optic nerve. In yours, I am pretty nearly sure that it arises from derangement of the stomach. A good dose of calomel, my dear Sir, will lay all your ghosts in the Red Sea!” [Pg 329]

An ignominious conclusion of a romance, which in some respects resembles the story of the Lutheran clergyman related in Wraxall’s Memoirs! who, on taking possession of his cure, was awoke early next morning by the spectre of a pastor in his gown and band, praying beside the desk at the foot of his bed, and holding a ghastly child by either hand, whom he recognised—by a likeness suspended in the parish church—as his predecessor in the living. This occurred in summer time; but at the beginning of winter, when the stove in his chamber came to be lighted, as it never used to be in the time of the former pastor, an unpleasant smell issuing from the chimney caused a search to be instituted; when lo! the bones of two young children were found among the ashes in the stove. The incumbent, who

had already circulated the report of his ghost story, had of course the comfort of finding child-murder attributed to his predecessor.

The instance of Eugene Aram and ‘Dan Clarke’s bones’ affords strong proof that those who hide can find; and in the ease in question, there appears some doubt whether the spectre were the delinquent. [Pg 330]

The subject of ghosts, however, must not be treated with less reverence than its due. Samuel and the Witch of Endor, and the declaration of the Evangelist that, during the Passion of our Saviour “the dead were raised up, and seen by many in the City of Jerusalem,” remind us that spectral visitations are consistent with the records of Holy Writ. But in this case, as in that of demoniacal possession, the Christian era has produced a revolution in the pschycological phenomena of nature; the power of the evil one over the human race being modified so that the dead are no longer raised up; while the angels of the Lord no longer manifest themselves to the eyes of mankind, nor do His fallen angels take possession of the living soul.

A remarkable story connected with the belief in spectral visitations, is that of the celebrated Bernhardi of Vienna; who after spending the evening in a gay carouse with a party of young men of infidel principles, where he boldly avowed his disbelief in the existence of ghosts, undertook to proceed, as the bell tolled midnight, to an adjoining church-yard, and stick into a grave pointed out to him, a fork which was taken from the supper-table and presented to him for the purpose.

A considerable wager was to depend upon his execution of the feat; and at the appointed hour, with a daring deportment Bernhardi quitted the company, and repaired to the scene of action. It was agreed that he should return to the supper-table, leaving the fork sticking in the grave so as to be found on the morrow, in token of his accomplishment of the exploit. [Pg 331]

Ten minutes would have sufficed for his visit to the church-yard. But at the close of an hour he was still absent; when his companions became convinced that he had turned coward and sneaked home to bed. They instantly determined to convict his defection by following him to his lodgings; but on their arrival, found, with no small consternation, that he had not made his appearance.

One of them, more his friend than the rest, really alarmed for his safety, proposed that they should visit the church-yard, and ascertain, at least, whether he had accomplished the feat. When lo! extended on the grave lay the lifeless body of the scoffer; who had burst a blood-vessel and died of fright.

Having accidentally pinned down his cloak to the earth in sticking the fork into the ground, where it still remained, he probably fancied himself transfixed by the hands of the grisly tenant of the grave he was thus unpardonably violating, for the sport of a drunken frolic; and thus became the victim of his unwarrantable sacrilege. Let those who jest upon such fearful matters, take warning by Bernhardi! [Pg 332]

Another superstition connected with the disembodied spirit, is the belief that spectres are to be found in the neighbourhood of hidden treasures.

In barbarous countries, it was the practice to kill a slave on a spot where treasures were deposited, in order that his soul might watch over the hoard, and terrify others from the spoil.

In Ireland, such murders would be gratuitous; for almost every spot pointed out as having been a depository of treasures, in the olden time, is said to be haunted by a banshee.

The same superstition appears to prevail in Germany and the Low Countries.

Some years ago, a most ridiculous incident, founded upon this prejudice, came before the inquisition of the Saxon tribunals.

The Burgomaster of the village of Brummersdorf, being a man of dissolute propensities, was in the habit of frequenting the public-house of the place, in order to enjoy with loose companions the irregularities he dared not attempt in his own house, in the fear of drawing upon himself the reprehension of his superiors in office. A fellow of the name of Osterwald, who acted as his clerk, was usually the companion of these excesses; and many a good bottle of wine formed the cement of the excellent understanding between them. [Pg 333]

One summer night, as they were seated, according to custom, in the public room of the inn, considerably the worse for a carouse prolonged after the decent inhabitants of the village had retired to rest, a stranger entered the inn demanding a night’s lodging; and having approached the table at which the Burgomaster and his friend were drinking, continued to attract their attention by uttering profound sighs.

Provoked by the interruption, the Burgomaster, whose name was Listenbach, demanded the cause of his affliction; to which the fellow replied that it was one with which he did not choose to trouble two gentlemen so distinguished as those he saw before him.

Tickled by this flattery, Osterwald insisted on an explanation; and, at length, after much show of caution and mystery, the stranger declared that being a poor student of the

University of Jena, he had been warned by a dream to repair to the old Castle of Brummersdorf; where he would find a fertile source of prosperity for his old age.

"I knew not," said the stranger, "that there existed such a spot as Brummersdorf on the face of the globe; but on consulting my books of science, the following morning, I discovered, not [Pg 334] only that it possessed the ruins of an ancient castle, formerly one of the finest in Westphalia, but that the constellations were favourable to the enterprize."

"I recommend you then to set off at daybreak for the Castle," said Osterwald, "which is situated only a few hundred yards' distance, on the cliff overhanging the village."

"Alas! I have just returned from thence!" replied the stranger. "I was expressly enjoined in my dream to visit the spot at the full of the moon."

"And what success have you met with, my good friend?" demanded Listenbach, with increasing curiosity.

"I need not tell you gentlemen, since you appear to be inhabitants of the place," replied the stranger, "that the old Castle of Brummersdorf is the depository of a prodigious treasure, the property of the extinct house of that name."

"Indeed!" exclaimed his astonished auditors. "That accounts for the edict issued by Government that the inhabitants should on no account be permitted to disturb a stone of that ancient monument!"

"On arriving at the spot," rejoined the stranger, "I made known in a loud voice the spiritual authority by which my mission was appointed. When lo! the spirit to whom is delegated the [Pg 335] guardianship of the hidden treasure replied that he was not permitted to divulge the spot where it was buried, unless adjured by three persons at once; and unless the vault containing it were opened by a magic key—to be formed of pure gold. But alas! however tempting the prospect, gentlemen, how is a poor devil like myself to procure the twenty-one ducats which the spirit asserts to be indispensable for the casting of the key; or the attendance of two enterprizing companions willing to share my exploit, and its noble reward?"

"Your two companions are before you," exclaimed the boozy Burgomaster, "if you will accept our company. Let me see what money I have in my purse!"

Even without paying the reckoning—including a fresh bottle of wine, called for to drink to the success of their expedition—the purse of the Burgomaster did not furnish half the necessary sum. Nothing was easier for him, however, than to despatch his clerk to the strong box of his office; which, as he was obliging enough to acquaint them, contained nearly a couple of hundred ducats.

In as short a time as the condition of his intellects would allow, Osterwald returned with the requisite sum; and the three companions, after an inspiriting bumper, took their way [Pg 336] towards the ruins of the old castle.[2]

Having arrived on a platform before the venerable gateway, distinctly visible by the brilliant light of the moon, the stranger drew from his pocket a short black stick, with which he traced upon the parched turf a small circle, adorning it with several mystical devices and symbols.

"Within this magic circle," said he, addressing his companions who were overcome, partly by wine and partly by awe, "you must place yourselves, in order to be secure from the molestation of the evil spirits besetting the spot; while I proceed to fulfil the conditions of the guardian spirit of the eastern tower."

The two drunkards, not a little pleased to be thus secured from an interview so tremendous, readily complied; and having furnished the stranger with the purse, took up their position within the circle. For some time, intense anxiety kept them silent. At length, they ventured to communicate to each other their opinion, that the interview between the strange student and the Spirit of the Castle was somewhat long; but being fortified by their position within [Pg 337] the magic circle, weary of standing, and oppressed by drowsiness, they agreed to stretch their limbs on the ground.

Next morning, the village of Brummersdorf was disturbed by the discovery that in the course of the night the office of the Burgomaster had been broken into, and its strong box pillaged, the iron safe being left empty on the floor. A further search was immediately instituted; but no Burgomaster was to be found; and his clerk being also absent, the dissolute character of Listenbach and Osterwald caused them to fall under suspicion of having embezzled and carried off the public funds.

The testimony of the village landlord, however, soon induced other surmises; and the constables, by whom the robbery was discovered, having proceeded at the head of a body of peasants to the ruins of the old Castle, the hapless Burgomaster and his drunken clerk were discovered stretched on the ground:—not, as was in the first instance apprehended, bathed in their gore, but quietly sleeping off the fumes of their carouse!

The loss of his money was succeeded, of course, by the loss of the place for which he had

shown himself so incompetent. But in the course of the summer, the cunning impostor was arrested; and it was the evidence of the parties themselves on his trial which gave publicity to the story!

An amusing anecdote occurs in the Memoirs of the President de Thou; whose son, also a lawyer of eminence, having been despatched by Government in 1596 to the town of Saumur, on a mission of consequence, was desired to take up his quarters in the ancient Hôtel-de-Ville, the seat of Government. [Pg 338]

Having retired to bed with the uneasy feelings usually attendant on sleeping in a strange place, particularly one of so gloomy and solitary an aspect, the President was awoke about midnight by the weight of some heavy burthen suddenly flung upon his chest; and entertained little doubt that an attempt was about to be made upon his life. Being a man of strength and courage, he seized the object in his arms, and flung it violently on the floor; when, by the heavy moans that ensued, he perceived it to be a human being.

“Doubtless some thief,” was his next reflection, “who was searching under my bolster during my slumbers for my watch and purse.”

While the President was preparing to jump out of bed, the figure, which was attired in white, rose feebly from the floor, and by the dim light of the moon, assumed a somewhat spectral appearance.

“Who are you?” cried the President, “answer this moment, or I will fell you to the earth!”

“Who am I, ignoramus? Who *should* I be but the Queen of Heaven!” replied a cracked female voice; while the servant of the President, who slept in an adjoining room, being now disturbed, rushed in with lights; and with the aid of the porter of the Hôtel-de-Ville discovered the intruder to be a poor maniac, accustomed to wander about the streets of Saumur and find shelter where she could. [Pg 339]

Perceiving the doorway of the private apartments of the Hôtel-de-Ville to be open, the poor woman had profited by so unusual a circumstance to secure the best bed-room. On Monsieur de Thou’s return to Paris, the King, who insisted on hearing from his own lips his ridiculous adventure, complimented him on his presence of mind; admitting that, for his own part, he stood more in fear of ghosts than of the shot of the enemy.

Had the servants of Monsieur de Thou encountered this midnight visitant instead of their master, it is probable that the town of Saumur would have enjoyed the reputation of having a haunted Hôtel-de-Ville as long as one stone remained upon another.

The forest of Ratenau, in Westphalia, passed, during a whole year, for being haunted by white spectres of the gnome or imp description; who having accosted, not only the peasants of the neighbourhood, but some of the servants of the Count returning after nightfall from the neighbouring market, the road through the forest came to be deserted, and the greatest consternation prevailed at the Schloss von Ratenau. [Pg 340]

“On my arriving at the Castle from Berlin to spend the summer,” said the Count, in relating the story, “I found the poor people firmly persuaded that a supernatural race of beings had attained supreme power over a portion of my estate; and it was vain to attempt to argue them into a more rational frame of mind. Judge, however, of my surprise, when, on returning through the forest, a few nights after my arrival, from the house of one of my neighbours, the carriage stopped suddenly, the horses reared violently; and the postillion, instead of attempting to keep his saddle, began roaring aloud, ‘The Spirits—The Evil Spirits!’

“Another minute and the carriage was dashed from the road and overturned in a ravine; nor was it without much difficulty that I extricated myself, the postillion having already taken to his heels accompanied his fellow servants. I confess to you, that, half stunned by the accident, I experienced some uneasiness at the idea of finding myself alone, at midnight, with the object which had produced this fearful consternation, whether robber or impostor; nay, I will not swear that some of the fantastic tales of Schiller and Goethe did not recur to my mind.

“Great, therefore, was my satisfaction on emerging from the broken vehicle, and perceiving two white shapes bounding and gambolling at a distance among the hoary trunks of the oak trees, to recognize two handsome white grey-hounds, which I afterwards ascertained to have strayed from the kennel of the Prince Henry of Prussia, and to have subsisted for a year on their depredations in the forest of Ratenau!” [Pg 341]

Another adventure occurred on the estate of a nobleman of the same family, in the Duchy of Brunswick. An attempt was made to rob the village church; the sacramental plate and poor-box being found one morning in the nave of the church wrapped in a piece of old sacking, so as to give rise to an opinion that the thieves must have been disturbed in their sacrilegious enterprize. Some time afterwards, a gang of burglars having been arrested, the judge of the neighbouring town charged them, after their conviction of divers other robberies, with being accessory to the crime in question.

In a moment, these fellows, who had preserved the most hardened audacity, fell on their knees, and freely confessed the attempt; adding, that they had been prevented carrying off their booty by the sudden appearance of the evil one emerging from the vestry; and as far as

the uncertain light of their dark lantern in that vast area enabled them to judge, in the form of a horned monster.

A general laugh instantly arose in court; several of the inhabitants of the village in question recognizing by this description, a tame stag, the pet of a former incumbent of the living, which was allowed the run of the presbytery orchard and church-yard; and which, having most opportunely sought shelter in the porch on the night in question, had probably followed the robbers into the church, which they entered by means of false keys, leaving the doors open for their readier escape. [Pg 342]

It is recorded in the Memoirs of one of the free-thinking circle which surrounded Baron d'Holbach, in Paris, previous to the Revolution, that having retired to bed one night after a gay supper, during which this *coterie* of sceptics amused themselves with the most blasphemous conversation, his gay companions, in order to try his courage, introduced into his bed-room a goat, whose fleece had been steeped in spirits of wine; which, when set on fire, gave to the unlucky animal an aspect truly horrific.

The goat almost equally terrified with its intended victim, instantly ran to the bed and attempted to extinguish the flames by rubbing itself against the bed-clothes, which it set on fire; and the young man, having drunk freely at supper so as to be heavily asleep was with difficulty extricated from the flames. The goat died of the consequences of this cruel experiment; and the young man was subject for the remainder of his life to epileptic fits. [Pg 343]

Many instances are on record of an equally serious termination to these foolish practical jokes. Witness the well-known story of the young lady, who, after boasting of her intrepidity, had a skeleton from a neighbouring surgery brought into her bed-room by her brothers and some young friends staying in her father's house. On retiring to rest, these cruel jesters listened anxiously for the shrieks which they hoped would betray her cowardice, and were greatly disappointed to find her as self-possessed as she had announced; for instead of screaming, she went quietly to bed. But alas! next morning, when the servant entered her room, she was found playing with the skeleton, in a state of complete fatuity!—

In the southern provinces of France, there prevails a superstition, derived probably from the lycanthropy of the ancients, that certain persons assume at night the form of wolves, and roam the country for prey, under the name of *loup-garoux*; a fable which gave rise to Perrault's charming fairy-tale of Little Red Riding Hood.

In a neighbourhood said to be frequented by one of these devastators, who was of course no other than a man in wolf's clothing, who, in this assumed character pillaged the adjacent farms, a *garde champêtre* or country constable, who had been several times attacked by the supposed monster, contrived to lop off his paw with a hatchet; and, on the escape of the *loup-garou*, found, as he expected, that the furry paw contained a human hand! All the labourers of the neighbourhood were accordingly visited by the gendarmes to ascertain, by his mutilation, the identity of the sheep-stealer. But the delinquent had already fled the country; and the imputed cause of his flight was confirmed a few years afterwards, by his re-appearance in another department of France, maimed of his left hand! [Pg 344]

Sometimes, these *loup-garoux* are madmen, whose insanity has taken this monomaniacal form; as in the instance of the vintager near Padua, in the sixteenth century, who was apprehended on a charge of furiously biting his neighbours on pretence of his lycanthropic propensities. When reminded that his face was unchanged, while the real *loup-garoux* have always a wolfish physiognony, he asserted that he was permitted to wear his wolf-skin inwards; whereupon the barbarous village tribunal by which he was tried, ordered his hands to be amputated and skinned, to ascertain the truth of the assertion!

Inflammation ensued, and the wretched lunatic died of his wounds!—

CHAPTER L. [Pg 345]

APOCRYPHAL ANIMALS.

The tarantula is a spider about the size of a nut; the head being surmounted by two horns charged with venomous matter. It has also antennæ which become violently agitated at the sight of its prey; with eight legs, and the same number of eyes, usually of a grey colour, but occasionally marked with livid spots upon a blueish ground. This variety is considered the most dangerous. The tarantula is hairy in the body, and lies torpid in the earth during winter. It revives at the return of spring, when the inhabitants of the district wear half boots for the protection of their legs.

In the month of June which is their breeding season, their venom acquires more virulence. The part wounded by this animal becomes livid, yellow, or black; and the victim sinks into despondency, as in cases of hydrophobia. The following account of the bite of a tarantula is [Pg 346]

borrowed from the letters of the physician St. André.

A Neapolitan soldier who had been bitten by a tarantula, though apparently cured, suffered from an annual attack of delirium, after which he used to sink into a state of profound melancholy; his face becoming livid, his sight obscure, his power of breathing checked, accompanied by sighs and heavings. Sometimes he fell senseless, and devoid of pulsation; ejecting blood from his nose and mouth, and apparently dying. Recourse was had to the influence of music; and the patient began to revive at the sound, his hands marking the measure, and the feet being similarly affected. Suddenly rising and laying hold of a bystander, he began to dance with the greatest agility during an uninterrupted course of four-and-twenty hours. His strength was supported by administering to him wine, milk, and fresh eggs. If he appeared to relapse; the music was repeated, on which he resumed his dancing. This unfortunate being used to fall prostrate if the music accidentally stopped, and imagine that the tarantula had again stung him. After a few years he died, in one of these annual attacks of delirium.

St. André is not the only man of science who attributes awful effects to the bite of the tarantula. Baglini, a man of considerable eminence, maintains that not only the bite causes [Pg 347] the patient to dance, but that the insect itself is readily excitable by music.

The properties attributed to the tarantula, in modern times, are not borne out by the testimony of the ancients. Dr. Pinel, in his commentaries upon the works of Baglini, a most eminent authority in the World of Science, quotes the adverse opinion of another man of acknowledged merit, Epiphany-Ferdinandi, who declares that many persons of his acquaintance had been bitten by tarantulas, without experiencing any other inconvenience than might have occurred from the sting of a wasp. Thus reduced to the class of a venomous spider, it becomes stripped of its magic powers as the scorpion ceased to be a salamander, when the ordeal of burning alcohol was found to be invariably fatal.

The renown of the salamander is, however, of far more ancient date than that of the tarantula. Aristotle, Pliny, Œlian, Nicander, all the illustrious apostles of the marvellous, declare that the salamander lives in the midst of flames, and exercises such a control over them, that one salamander was capable of extinguishing the Lemnian forges. In the time of Henri II., the famous Ambroise Paré, pronounced the salamander to be incombustible. Others assert that they have seen salamanders extinguish burning embers by emitting a [Pg 348] viscous humour, and Benvenuto Cellini, in his Memoirs, gives an account of having seen a salamander in the midst of his fire. The salamander, or rather the newt that bears that name, partakes of the lizard and frog, being generally from five to six inches in length. Naturalists admit two kinds, the land and the water salamander. Maupertius, among many others, submitted both species to the test of fire, and the result was the same as with any other animal.

The were-wolves of antiquity, and *loup-garoux* of the middle ages, disappeared in the open daylight of modern science. Virgil confers on Mœris the power of transforming himself into a wolf, Varro Pamponius, Mela, Strabo, ascribe the same faculty to various individuals skilled in the art of magic. In the annals of the early French courts of law, there may be found many instances of condemnation for witchcraft and transformation into were-wolves for criminal purposes; and more than one of these wretched victims, probably in a fit of mental aberration, pleaded guilty to the accusation.

In 1521, Pierre Burgot and Michael Verdun, confessed before the Parliament of Besançon, that they had frequently transformed themselves into were-wolves, and attacked little girls and boys. Half a century later, the Parliament of Paris condemned to the flames Jacques [Pg 349] Rollet for having transformed himself into a were-wolf, and half devoured a little boy. If we can believe the account of Job Pincel, Constantinople was so infested with were-wolves, in the middle of the sixteenth century, that the Sultan went forth with his guard and exterminated one hundred and fifty, when the remainder took to flight.

In a conference of theologians convened by the Emperor Sigismund, transformation into were-wolves was pronounced a crime, and any assertion to the contrary was accounted heresy.

In the same century, domestic goblins or familiars were generally accredited. In the twelfth century, a goblin domesticated in a small town of Saxony, was known by the name of Cap-a-Point, and a great favourite with the inhabitants; for whom he cleared their wood, lit their fires, and turned their spits. He was, however, of a vindictive temper; and a turnspit, in one of the kitchens he frequented, having ill-used him, he strangled him in the night, cut him in pieces, and served him to his master in a ragout. The goblin, who saved himself by flight, was anathematized by the clergy as an evil spirit; being, in all probability, some half idiotic deaf and dumb urchin, like Peter the Wild Boy.

In the thirteenth century, a house in the Rue d’Enfer in Paris, subsequently a monastery, was infested by goblins, and in the year 1262, the King granted the reverend fathers an [Pg 350] exemption from taxes, provided they were able to exorcise these familiar spirits by their prayers and invocations. Among the last on record were those seen by Monsieur Berbiginer de Terre Neuve, who lived in the Rue Guénégaud, and left copious Memoirs of his contentions with these imaginary beings!—

While witches, spirits, and salamanders, have disappeared from the surface of Europe, modern Asia appears to have sustained a far greater loss in the phœnix, which has ceased to rise from its ashes.

Many writers, both ancient and modern, have minutely described the appearance and habits of this fabulous bird; as though an object of natural history rather than of poetical fiction.

The phœnix may be regarded as an allegorical type, like most mythological fables. Among the great writers who appear to have believed in its actual existence was Tacitus. In the sixth book of his Annals, he affirms that the phœnix was seen in Egypt under the Consulate of Paulus Fabius, and Lucius Vitellius; and that its appearance gave rise to much discussion among the scientific men of Egypt and Greece. Tacitus adds that the periodical return of the phœnix is an incontestable truth. The scholiast, Solinus, relates the same facts; adding that the phœnix was taken during the last year of the eighth century of the foundation of Rome, [Pg 351] where it was exhibited to the public gaze. The event was recorded in the imperial archives.

The account given by Tacitus is far more doubtful than that of Solinus. The Emperor Claudius probably chose that the Romans should see a phœnix in a certain bird presented to their admiration; and many a modern sovereign might, by the same means, have created a phœnix.

The Fathers of the Church profess the same conviction as Tacitus and Solinus concerning the phœnix. A passage taken from an Epistle to the Corinthians by St. Clement, in speaking of the resurrection of mankind, has the following passage:

“There exists in Arabia, a bird, the only one of its kind, which is called the phœnix. After living one hundred years, on the eve of death it embalms itself; and having collected myrrh, incense, and aromatics, forms a funeral pyre for its own obsequies. When its flesh is decomposed, a worm is generated, which forms and perfects itself from the remains into a new phœnix. Having acquired strength to take wing, it carries off the tomb containing the mortal remains of its parent, and carries it from Arabia to the city of Heliopolis, in Egypt. Having traversed the air, visible to all eyes, it places its burthen on the altar of the Sun, and flies away again. The priests, by consulting their chronicles, have discovered that this [Pg 352] phenomenon is repeated every five hundred years.”

The description of the phœnix by Solinus is as follows:—“This bird is of the size of an eagle; its head embellished with a cone of feathers; its neck surrounded with heron-like plumes and dazzling as gold. The remainder of the body is of a beautiful violet, excepting the tail, which is a mingled rose and blue.”

Plutarch speaks of the phœnix with as much reverence as if it were an illustrious man. He states the brain to be an article of delicacy for the table, though he does not mention having tasted it! The fable of the phœnix, which is both graceful and ingenious, and has been rendered available by the poets of the last two thousand years, was probably invented by the priests of Egypt, the first embalmers of the dead. Another bird of Arabia—the roc, or condor, has given rise to a thousand Oriental fables. The Bird of Paradise, which was for centuries supposed to be the inhabitant of a higher sphere, so rarely was it seen alive, has now been tamed in an European aviary at Canton. Let us hope that some future menagerie may obtain a specimen of the phœnix.

CHAPTER LI. [Pg 353]

PROFESSIONS ESTEEMED INFAMOUS.

In the reign of Louis XVIII., an oration was made in the French Chamber of Deputies, complaining of the vileness of certain parties employed by the police. The Duc Decazes, then at the head of the administration, replied: “Point out to me honest men who would undertake the same functions, and I promise to employ them.”

The infamy attached to spies and common informers is a wholesome prejudice. In England, the nature of our constitution and political institutions secures us from the intrusion of such vermin; who were extensively employed in France by the police of the elder Bourbons and of Napoleon. In Austria, and, above all, in Russia, no society is secure against them; and half the Russian travellers dispersed through Europe, even those bearing illustrious names, are neither more nor less than spies. The fashionable watering places of the continent are [Pg 354] infested by these individuals, most of whom have solicited from the Emperor the honourable appointment of travelling spy.

A vocation which must always convey infamy, and which is more essential to the well-being of society, is that of public executioner; and notwithstanding the disgust with which it is contemplated, whenever there occurs a vacancy in the office, in any country, a host of solicitors present themselves.

In Russia, which many pretend to consider a barbarous country, there is no salaried executioner. So infamous is the office considered, that in the event of a capital execution, a criminal convicted of a less heinous crime undertakes it, and thereby gains his pardon. Formerly, in state executions, the executioner used to be masked, to secure him from the odium attending his calling.

In some countries, the stage, or rather the profession of an actor is an object of violent prejudice. In France actors were denied for several centuries the rites of Christian burial, and even in the present century have been made objects of excommunication. England was the first to show a more liberal example, by the interment of Garrick in Westminster Abbey, and the intermarriage of the nobility with actresses;—a violent and pernicious extreme. During the Consulate in France, even on occasion of state dinners, Mademoiselle Coutat was [Pg 355] admitted as the associate of Madame Bonaparte, as Talma of the First Consul. But on the restoration of the Bourbons, public opinion resumed in this particular nearly all its former inveteracy.

In England, the leading members of the profession, such as the Kembles, Young, Macready, Charles Kean, whose conduct in private life is as exemplary as their talents on the stage are distinguished, are received in society with the same respect conceded to any other order of literary persons. In France, this honourable position would be untenable; so deeply rooted are the prejudices of the vulgar. A clever French writer, who was in his youth an actor, relates the following anecdote:—

“Being once engaged in a company of players in a town in the south of France, he devoted the leisure of his theatrical duties to literary pursuits. A shoe-maker, whom he employed, an ardent admirer of the dramatic art, occasionally attempted to engage him in conversation; and the actor indulged the man’s passion for theatricals by presenting him with tickets of free admission. At the end of some month’s acquaintance, the shoemaker entered the actor’s lodgings one morning in the greatest glee, and informed him that it was his daughter’s wedding-day, and that he was come to invite him to the ceremony. The actor, hesitating to [Pg 356] accept the invitation, made a variety of polite excuses to his humble friend, who seized him cordially by the hand. “I see how it is,” said he. “You think my friends will not like to sit at table with an actor! But never mind. I am not proud, and for my sake they will overlook it!”

The gentlemen of the household of Louis XIV. refused to make the King’s bed with Molière, who had purchased a small place in the royal household, because he had been an actor. This was a just punishment to one who should have abstained from a position so infinitely below his rank in the great scale of human nature. Of the individuals thus fastidious, the names are unknown to posterity. That of Molière is immortal.

John Kemble was the occasional guest of the Prince Regent, and Mrs. Siddons enjoyed the highest distinctions from the highest personages in the realm. Still, even in England, among the lower classes, a prejudice prevails against comedians; but arising chiefly from the irregularities with which many belonging to the inferior class of the profession are unfortunately chargeable.

CHAPTER LII. [Pg 357]

SUPERNATURAL HUMAN BEINGS.

There is no species of supernatural power to which some impostor or other has not pretended; some to incombustibility; some to insubmergeability; some to invulnerability; some to invisibility. Men have been found who pretend to fly,—to walk upon the surface of the waters,—to penetrate, by the acuteness of their optics, into the depths of the earth. But though an announcement of a balloon, a diving-bell, an electrical telegraph, or even a railroad, would have appeared as much a matter of empty vaunt to the ancients as these pretensions to ourselves, no extent of modern discovery has enabled or is likely to enable mankind so thoroughly to defy the existing laws of nature. The conformation of the human form expressly points out the purposes and capabilities for which it was created.

We read in old books, in proverbial reference to human speed, that such a one ‘runs like a man without a spleen;’ and it has been asserted that the bearers of the posts of the ancients, [Pg 358] had their spleen extracted in order to facilitate despatch.

Even with our present chirurgical proficiency, such an operation would be somewhat hazardous. But certain it is that dogs from which the spleen has been removed in the way of experiment, are observed to grow unnaturally fat, which would be no great advantage to a pedestrian. If the operation in question were both harmless and effectual, it is deserving the consideration of the King of Naples; who is accompanied by running footmen from his palace in that city to his country palace of Caserta at some leagues’ distance; the unfortunate men being compelled to keep up on foot with the hard trotting of the horses. Not a year passes,

but one of these victims of royal state drops dead from the exertion.

Running footmen constituted a very imposing portion of royal and noble equipage in former times, when preceding the stately carriages of prelates, drawn by mules, or the lumbering coaches and six of the days of the Stuarts; when part of their business was to forewarn the coachmen of holes in the pavement, or water-courses in the imperfect roads. But the office of running footman in the days of macadamization, is a work of supererogation. The act of barbarity of removing the spleen from such men would not be much more cruel, however, than killing them by so terrible an excess of exertion. [Pg 359]

Nothing could be more remarkable than the feats of activity performed in France by the *coureurs*, or running-footmen of the nobility prior to the Revolution, and without any dangerous consequences. They were generally Basques, or natives of the frontier country of Gascony, proverbially light and active.

In the Landes, adjoining their district, another species of activity prevails—the walking or running on stilts, necessitated by the sandy nature of the soil. A large company of the inhabitants of that curious desart, proceeding to market, resembles the course of a troop of ostriches, or emus, over the Pampas.

The first aspect of these strangely-mounted men, probably gave rise to some of the fictions of our early fairy-tales, such as the seven-leagued boots of the ogre; just as the Laplanders and Patagonians originated races of beings which exaggeration rendered fabulous.

The marvels related by the traveller, Mandeville, and the more recent wonders described by Mungo Park, drew down upon their narrators a charge of mendacity, for which we have been forced to make atonement to their memory. How curious will be the first book of travels in England, written by a New Zealander!—The author would be sacrificed by his countrymen, on his return, as a wanton impostor! [Pg 360]

It is related in French jest-books, that during the period of the religious troubles of France, when decapitation was so common, a Gascon executioner, boasting of his skill, was heard to protest that his victims were so artistically despatched as to remain unconscious of their execution. He was forced to say to them, ‘have the goodness to shake your head!’—when it rolled to the ground. In emulation of this foolish joke, people used to assert during the Reign of Terror, that they were forced to shake their heads every morning to be certain that, amid the general massacre, they had escaped the guillotine. A century hence, what with the acceleration of motion in every department—the application of caoutchouc and bitumen to all sorts of purposes—and the general diffusion of chemical science, we shall scarcely know whether we are on terra-firma, or in the air; and the reflective powers of the human race may chance to become strangely confused by such universal motation.

We may at least anticipate from the same source, the obliteration of vulgar errors, and the dissolution of popular prejudices. Our successors will have no time to cherish such chimeras as omens, presages, or presentiments: no leisure for listening to old wives’ tales, or traditions of ghosts and devils.

For all classes, education effects the miracle of making the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk; and in our own, its operations commence at too early an age to leave our children at the mercy of ignorant nurses—the fountain-head of all popular superstition. [Pg 361]

A love of the marvellous is, however, so strongly implanted in certain natures, and our capacity is after all so finite, that prejudices must ever, to a certain extent, prevail. Hypochondriacs, invalids, and pregnant women, will always be susceptible of the terrors of superstition; and so long as children are born with the marks and deformities to which all animated nature is liable, so long as the winter wind howls, ‘the owls shriek, and the crickets cry,’ nervous persons will not be wanting to listen to the foolish interpretations of any empty-headed gossip at hand.

To remedy the mischief, it becomes a peremptory duty to render the rising generation ‘wise virgins’ in their youth, in order that they may not become foolish old women in their age, to perpetuate the evils of POPULAR PREJUDICES and NATIONAL SUPERSTITIONS.

END.

LONDON:
Printed by Schulze & Co., 13, Poland Street.

Footnotes:

[1] The reader will be struck by the affinity between this Legend, and the Ettrick Shepherd's beautiful tale of "Kilmeny," taken from a Highland tradition.

[2] The scene of Dousterswivel in the house of the Antiquary, may, perhaps, owe its origin to the heroes of the Castle of Brummersdorf.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A WORLD OF WONDERS, WITH ANECDOTES AND OPINIONS CONCERNING POPULAR SUPERSTITIONS ***

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