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Содержание

PREDOMINANT DELUSIONS	5
THE LAST OF THE HADDONS	9
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	12

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PREDOMINANT DELUSIONS

Seeing is believing! Such is an old saw, not usually called in question, and yet it is exceedingly fallacious. A great many phenomena seemingly true by the eyesight are not true at all. Ignorance and prejudice have led to very extraordinary mistakes. We speak of the sun rising and setting, because it appears to do so, but it neither sets nor rises. The earth turns in front of it like a roast turning before a fire. A conjurer will clearly shew you that he will bring any number of eggs out of an empty hat. He only brings them out of his sleeve, where they were cunningly concealed. And so on with a great many other illusions, all seemingly fair and above board, but in which we are imposed on either by our senses, or by some fallacy in reasoning. Less than two hundred years ago, courts of justice were hanging and burning thousands of old women for being witches – all on a sort of evidence which in the present day would only be laughed at. The world now knows better than believe such trash, but it took a long time to learn; and even yet this highly experienced and much complimented world occasionally falls into the most absurd crazes; or perhaps we should more correctly say, there are large numbers of tolerably educated but credulous people who with a taste for the wonderful are ever ready to believe in any kind of nonsense that turns up. These worthy individuals are, of course, not without excuse. Starting with the principle that there may be forces in nature which science has as yet failed to disclose, we should be cautious in asserting that any particular phenomenon that seems incomprehensible is a result of mere illusion or imposture. Let every mysterious demonstration, they say, be impartially inquired into. Quite correct. The misfortune, however, is, that before the matters in question have been examined impartially by the light of science, the craze gets ahead, and many persons weakly allowing themselves to be carried away by their feelings, get painfully compromised, and are by the more cool and cautious part of mankind set down as little better than – fools. Very hard! But the warning offered is useful. If people of good standing will believe in absurdities without proper examination, they must take the consequences.

We have been led to make these remarks by a perusal of the lately issued work, *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, &c., Historically and Scientifically considered*, by Dr W. B. Carpenter. In this ably written and eminently readable small volume, the author brings to bear a long experience in scientific inquiry into the popular crazes and impostures of the last forty years, beginning with Mesmerism and Table-turning, and ending with Spiritualism in the several shapes it has assumed. We commend the book to the serious consideration of the credulous. Tracing the history of marvels of different kinds, Dr Carpenter states that the whole has been 'a long succession of epidemic delusions, the form of which has changed from time to time, whilst their essential nature has remained the same throughout; and that the condition which underlies them all is *the subjection of the mind to a dominant idea*. There is a constitutional tendency in many minds to be seized by some strange notion which takes entire possession of them; so that all the actions of the individual "thus possessed" are results of its operation.' Placed on this footing, the Predominant Delusion, be it a belief in witchcraft, mesmerism, or spiritualism, is a kind of monomaniacal frenzy. An absurd idea has got possession of the individual, and no reasoning with him to the contrary will have any effect in driving it out. He will absolutely get out of temper if his fanciful notions are so much as questioned. Usually the monomania spreads; and the more who suffer themselves to be affected, the keener and more demonstrative does the delusion become. Certain frantic religious ferments in past and recent times have been due to nothing else

than strange contagious influences, of which, after a time, when passion has subsided, all are pretty well ashamed, and fain to stifle out of disagreeable remembrance. We happen to have seen several of these prevalent crazes, droll in some respects, but very pitiable. After such mental disturbances, things, happily, shake themselves right at last, and all goes on as usual. The fever has subsided.

Often, able and estimable men suffer themselves to be affected by the prevailing craze, and lead on others as imitators. It is now about forty years since, when by invitation to a friend's house, we were present at an evening séance in which an eminent professor at one of our universities entertained the company with what he confidently believed to be mesmeric experiments, such as sending persons to sleep, or rendering them temporarily mute by bidding them 'tie their tongue.' Here was a man skilled in a branch of physical science, but of eager temperament and with a rage for novelty, lending himself indiscreetly to certain popular delusions which had originated in the crazed fancy of a charlatan. Mesmeric experiments of this sort were for a time a favourite amusement. They reminded us of the superstition in the old legends, in which 'glamour' is said to have been cast over weak-minded individuals. This ancient glamour consisted in producing by looks and gestures a negation of self-assertion. The operator threw the patient into a kind of spell-bound or dreamy condition without any power of correct reasoning. It was the conquest of the strong and resolute will over the weak and irresolute, through the effects of a kind of jugglery.

Mesmeric sleep, as it is called, is ordinarily produced by seemingly mystic passes of the hands, and an intense concentration of looks on the eyes of the person operated upon. In it there is nothing marvellous. Dr Carpenter explains that it 'corresponds precisely in character with what is known in medicine as "hysteric coma;" the insensibility being as profound while it lasts as in the coma of narcotic poisoning or pressure on the brain; but coming on and passing off with such suddenness as to shew that it is dependent upon some transient condition of the sensorium, which, with our present knowledge, we can pretty certainly assign to a reduction in the supply of blood caused by a sort of spasmodic contraction of the blood-vessels.' This explanation, on a physiological basis, considerably reduces the mystic character of those mesmeric marvels in which the late Dr Elliotson indulged at his public séances in Conduit Street. It does not, however, as we imagine, detract from the medical value that may be attached to the calming of the nervous system by what is spoken of as mesmeric sleep. Mr Braid, a practising surgeon in Manchester, ingeniously fell on the device of producing a profound mesmeric slumber by simply causing individuals to fix their gaze determinedly at a cork stuck at the top of their nose. It was not surprising that people should have been lulled by being subjected to this species of Hypnotism. Ordinary sleep may in most instances be induced by keeping the lower extremities perfectly still, and determinedly fixing attention on the act of breathing through the nostrils. Speaking from experience, we offer this as a hint to the habitually sleepless.

In the amusing book before us, the author shews how clairvoyants have imposed on public assemblies by tricks, which could be seen through by sceptical observers. Miss Martineau, as is well known, had a profound belief in the marvels of mesmerism. This lady had a servant, J., to whom was imputed wonderful powers of clairvoyance. On one occasion, while in the mesmeric sleep, she gave 'the particulars of the wreck of a vessel, of which her cousin was one of the crew; as also of the previous loss of a boy overboard; with which particulars, it was positively affirmed by Miss Martineau, and believed by many on her authority, that the girl could not have been previously informed, as her aunt had only brought the account to the house when the séance was nearly terminated. On being asked, says Miss M., two evenings afterwards, when again in sleep, "whether she knew what she related by hearing her aunt telling the people below," J. replied: "No; I saw the place and the people themselves – like a vision." And Miss Martineau believed her.' After all, the girl was proved to be an impostor. A medical friend, on making a rigorous investigation, discovered 'unequivocally that J.'s aunt had told the whole story to her sister, in whose house Miss M. was residing, about *three hours before the séance*; and that though J. was not then in the room, the circumstances were fully discussed in her presence before she was summoned to the mesmeric performance. Thus not only

was J. completely discredited as a seer, but the value of *all* testimony to such marvels was seriously lowered, when so intelligent a witness as Harriet Martineau could be so completely led astray by her prepossessions as to put forth statements as facts, which were at once upset by the careful inquiry which she ought to have made before committing herself to them.'

A preconceived determination or proneness to believe in the reality of any seeming marvel without any other evidence than the senses, goes a great way to explain the stories that are fondly cherished by the dupes of spiritualism. The error lies in taking things for granted. At one time people were all agog as to the wonders of table-turning, and it is amusing to remember how the wonder was speedily exploded by the appliances suggested by Faraday. He conclusively shewed that the operators, however honest, unconsciously exerted a muscular action, causing the table to turn in the direction previously conceived. The whole thing was a curious piece of self-deception. Dupes of spiritualistic manipulators are similarly self-deceived. They go to séances in the fond hope of seeing incomprehensible marvels by 'mediums' and table-rappers, and come away believing that all has been real, instead of being only tricks worthy or unworthy of a conjurer. Certainly, at no séance of spiritualists have the performances excelled the wonders effected by those adepts in conjuring, Maskelyne and Cooke.

Although exploded and discredited, table-turning has latterly come up in the new form of planchette, a fashionable toy alleged to be endowed with singularly mystic qualities. Consisting of a small and easily moved board, in which a pencil is stuck with the point downwards on paper or slate laid on a table, the machine is said to be capable of answering questions put to the operator who presses on the board with his hands. No doubt, the pencil will write answers as required, but it does so only by the conscious or unconscious muscular action of the hands on the board. This weak device of pretending to get answers to questions by the agency of an inanimate piece of wood and a pencil, has been resorted to by real or sham believers in spiritualism; and we are presented with the melancholy spectacle of decent-looking ladies and gentlemen sitting gravely round a table affecting to hold a conversation with beings in the unseen world.

Just as mesmerism lost its reputation as a branch of psychology, so has spiritualism begun to be estimated at its true value. It was always very much against it, that its professors held their séances in darkened apartments, and that for the most part they took money for the display of their wonders. The thing became a trade, and so it would have continued but for the prosecution and conviction of persons who stood guilty of imposture, and of taking money under false pretences. To add to the discomfiture of trading spiritualists, their tricks have been exposed in the book, *Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism*, by D. D. Home, who, however, lets it be known that he is among the few genuine professors of the art whose operations are alleged to be beyond suspicion! As shewn by Dr Carpenter, deception is not confined to those who practise for gain. He speaks of young ladies who take pleasure in imposing on elderly persons by tricks of an ingenious kind. 'I could tell,' says he, 'the particulars, in my possession, of the detection of the imposture practised by one of the most noteworthy of these lady-mediums, in the distribution of flowers which she averred to be brought in by the "spirits" in a dark séance, fresh from the garden and wet with the dew of heaven; these flowers having really been previously collected in a basin up-stairs, and watered out of a decanter standing by – as was proved by the fact, that an inquisitive sceptic having furtively introduced into the water of the decanter a small quantity of a nearly colourless salt (ferrocyanide of potassium), its presence in the dew of the flowers was afterwards recognised by the appropriate chemical test (a per-salt of iron), which brought out "Prussian-blue."'

Other instances are presented of deceptions practised in private séances; but for these and much that illustrates the whole tenor of the delusion, we must refer to the work itself. We restrict ourselves to quoting only one, but a very pertinent remark: 'It is affirmed, such exposures *prove* nothing against the genuineness of any new manifestation. But I affirm that to any one accustomed to weigh the value of evidence, the fact that the testimony in favour of a whole series of antecedent claims has

been completely upset, seriously invalidates (as I have shewn in regard to mesmeric *clairvoyance*) the trustworthiness of the testimony in favour of any new claimant to "occult" powers. Why should I believe the testimony of any believer in the genuineness of D's performances, when he has been obliged to admit that he has been egregiously deceived in the cases of A, B, and C?'

For this instructive and admirably written work, offering a lucid philosophical explanation of the source of Predominant Delusions, which are apt to be turned to a bad account by the designing, and are in every sense mischievous, as conveying erroneous notions of natural phenomena, the learned author deserves the hearty thanks of the community.

W. C.

THE LAST OF THE HADDONS

CHAPTER XXXV. – A TWELVEMONTH AFTER

A glorious morning in early August. I was standing in a large cheerful room, from the windows of which was an extensive view of beautiful country, hill and dale, clothed with the rich ripe fullness of fruit-time, while to ear was borne 'the distant cries of reapers in the corn – all the live murmur of a summer day.'

I was attiring myself – or I ought rather to say being attired – for a wedding, attended right royally, no less than twenty handmaidens hovering about me, each eager to do something towards my adornment; and each as desirous that I should look my very best as I was myself, which is saying a great deal. Never was slave of fashion more anxious to make an effective appearance than was I on this bright August morning. But even I began to be satisfied as the process of adornment went on, and I was gradually transformed from a sober brown chrysalis into a brilliant butterfly. A bright blue silk dress, an elegant lace cloak, white bonnet with blush roses, &c. &c. Everything, be it understood, of the very best that money could buy, and made in the latest mode, there not being a sombre colour or faded shred about me. 'All new and fresh and bright, as befits a butterfly!' I ejaculated, contemplating myself with a glad smile.

And then there was the one thing – ah, I knew it now; my prayers *had* been answered! Even allowing for the flush of excitement, this was not the face of a twelvemonth ago smiling gaily back at me from the dressing-glass. The eyes had lost their mournfulness, the mouth had become used to smile, and the whole face was full of life and colour. 'Yes; it all matches beautifully,' I acknowledged, in smiling assent to the exclamations of my attendants. 'But I require care, you know,' as they all pressed about me; 'not a rose must be crushed. And it is to be hoped that I shall not forget that I wear a train, and spoil the effect by falling over it;' which raised a laugh amongst my handmaidens, as royal wit should. Then being pronounced 'finished,' I went out into the gallery, and descended the broad staircase (my home was one of the finest old mansions in Kent) with my train about me. In the long room I was met by Jane Osborne, who, after examining me very critically from head to foot, was graciously pleased to add her testimony to that of the rest, and pronounce that I should do. I was nevertheless obliged to call her to order in a little aside for a certain trembling of the voice and moisture in the eyes – a weakness not to be looked over in Jane Osborne.

'God bless you, Mary! By five o'clock, remember.'

I just touched her lips, since she would have it so, notwithstanding my pointing it out to her that it was not a time for sentiment; and then with her hand in mine and attended by my train, I went into the court-yard, where my carriage awaited me.

'It couldn't have been grander if it had been created out of a pumpkin!' I whispered to Jane.

She looked uneasily at me. 'Do not try to jest, Mary,' she replied anxiously.

'Why not? if I feel equal to it, you foolish person!'

'Are you equal to it, Mary?'

'Quite. If I had doubted it before, I knew when I saw myself in the glass this morning. You ought to be able to see the difference.'

'Yes,' she murmured, 'there is a difference. – You will find the flowers in the carriage, Mary.'

I stepped in, and was swiftly borne away, amidst – I had almost written a flourish of trumpets, so very loud and shrill were some of the voices shouting all sorts of good wishes after me.

I flattered myself that the effect was very telling indeed, when my equipage, with its spirited horses and coachman and footman wearing large breastplates of flowers, drew up before the porch

of the pretty little ivy-covered vale church. I was received by the beadle and pew-opener with due respect, and found that I was in very good time. The gentlemen and some of the guests were already in the vestry, said the pew-opener; and in the porch were waiting two pretty young bride's-maids, who eyed me rather curiously. They had just time to remind me that my place was with the guests inside the church, and I to reply that I preferred waiting there, when a carriage of much more modest pretensions than mine drew up, and the two I waited for stepped out.

'Mary, Mary!' ejaculated Lilian, springing towards me with outstretched arms, forgetful, as I even then had the nerve to remind her, of our finery. What would become of me if I gave way now? 'Mary, Mary!'

And no sooner had I released myself from Lilian than there was my dear old Mrs Tipper giving me a good honest hug, utterly regardless of appearances. And as to finery! she had long ceased to allow that to interfere with her love, and was not to be daunted by any such consideration now.

The little bride's-maids, who were very carefully guarding their laces and muslins, reserving themselves for the right moment, looked with much disfavour at an ebullition of feeling at the wrong point in the ceremony; and now reminded us that it was half-past eleven, and that the clergyman and the other guests had been waiting some time. At which, with a meaning look at me, Mrs Tipper put Lilian's hand into mine, and we two passed up the aisle together, whilst the dear little woman walked after us with the bride's-maids, notwithstanding their whispered protestations that it was 'wrong – altogether wrong – and the effect was *quite* spoiled!'

As Philip turned to meet us, I put his bride's hand into his with a smile which appeared to satisfy even him. Moreover, Robert Wentworth's face brightened, and Robert Wentworth's critical observance had been anticipated with some little anxiety.

Lilian's uncle, the father of the bride's-maids, was to 'give her away;' he looked not a little curiously at the person whose appearance seemed to cause so much sensation; but his curiosity did not affect me.

At the words, 'Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?' Major Maitland gave the necessary response; but both bride and bridegroom turned their eyes upon me, as though the gift were mine.

As soon as the ceremony was over, Philip and Lilian turned towards me; and for a few moments we three gave no thought to the *convenances*, as we clasped hands and murmured a few words meant only for each other. Then the rest of the party gathered about the bride and bridegroom, and I became conscious of the presence of others that were known to me: Philip's brother Mr Dallas, and his wife, and Mrs Trafford and her sister-in-law Mrs Chichester. Marian Trafford was gorgeously attired in what no doubt was the latest Paris fashion; although I think that even she was conscious that her splendour did not eclipse mine. They had not evidently expected to see me there, and both, I felt, watched very curiously for any slight giving-way upon my part. But if I could calmly meet Philip's eyes, it may be imagined that I was proof against the scrutiny of either Marian Trafford or her sister-in-law. And Mrs Chichester's softly spoken little aside: 'Did not I think that the bride and bridegroom were an admirably matched couple, even to age – eighteen and thirty was just as it should be; was it not?' was assented to with a cheerfulness which did not seem to gratify her as a looker-on might have expected it to do.

There was only one shadow on the bride's lovely face, and that came when she signed her name; and perhaps it was natural enough that Major Maitland should frown at the remembrance of the wrong done to his sister. But it was the last time Lilian would be so pained, and she was not allowed time to dwell upon it now.

When we stood aside for her and Philip to pass out, she caught my hand and drew me with them, and in that very unorthodox fashion we left the church and entered the carriage – 'Mary's carriage,' as Lilian termed it. There not being room enough at the cottage, the breakfast was to take place at

Hill Side, and we were driven there – so far as a carriage could convey us – for we had to alight at the foot of the hill and walk the remainder of the distance.

As soon as we reached the plantations, Lilian took my face between her hands and gazed at me with anxious tender eyes. Then, with a deep-drawn sigh of relief and a radiant smile she murmured: 'It was true, Philip; she *is* happy!'

'Yes; thank God!' he ejaculated.

I made it the occasion for a little jest about my truth having been doubted; and by that time some of the others had come up with us, when the bride naturally absorbed all the attention, and the rest was easy. It was the first wedding-breakfast at which I had been a guest, and therefore I was not *au fait* in such matters. I can only say that if there were any little divergences from the etiquette proper upon such occasions, they were unobserved by me. I knew that the two I most cared for in the world were made happy, and that all the rest of us were pleasant with each other, as befitted wedding-guests. I was afterwards told that the bride's-maids thought that they had not been sufficiently considered in being only provided with one gentleman, and he so grave a one as Robert Wentworth. And Philip's brother and his wife were said to be very stiff with us all; whilst Major Maitland was more anxious than it was polite to be to catch an early return train, reminding his daughters that *they* must not be the cause of his losing it, and so forth. But I looked through rose-coloured spectacles, and it seemed all flowers and sunshine to me.

Dear old Mrs Tipper and I sat together; and it did me not a little good to feel the eloquent pressure of her hand, which she now and again slipped into mine as the breakfast went on. I am, to this day, not quite sure how much Mrs Tipper knew of the truth; but I saw that she at anyrate guessed something of it, when, in a tremulous voice, she whispered a few words about my having given happiness to her child.

I tried a little jest about still having enough and to spare.

'Yes, my dear; that is the best of it; you really are happy. Thank God, you are reaping' —

I hurriedly commenced asking questions about Becky, who, as I had so much hoped she would, was about to become the wife of Tom. He was engaged for the garden at Hill Side, and it was arranged that he should live with his wife at the cottage. Mrs Tipper elected to continue her cottage life; and as she had become very much attached to Becky, she was very glad to adopt my suggestion, that the married couple should live with her.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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