

TABLE-TURNING

AND

TABLE-TALKING,

CONSIDERED

WITH REFERENCE TO SOME PAMPHLETS PUBLISHED

BY

THE REV. N. S. GODFREY,

AND

THE REV. E. GILLSON.

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TABLE-TALKING CONSIDERED.

MARVELLOUSLY rapid as the spread of a popular mania usually is, there are few subjects which have so quickly, and so completely, absorbed public attention as Table-turning. Nor has it been restricted to any one particular class of people, but high and low, young and old, educated and uneducated, philosophers and fools, all have indulged more or less in the practice; some have ridiculed, some have doubted, some have believed, but all have *tried* it.

So long as it was confined merely to the causing a table or a hat to turn round at the will of the operator, it was a harmless, and in many respects an interesting, experiment. Considerable discussion naturally arose as to the cause of the phenomenon. No one could deny that tables were turned without any sensible exertion, and this fact had to be accounted for. We do not for a moment believe that the operators were guilty of any wilful deception,—we think that in the great majority of cases, the utmost fairness was observed, and that the result afforded a very fair subject for discussion, and was not unworthy

of the scientific investigation which it received. It may appear matter for surprise to the more thoughtful amongst us that so trifling a subject should have taken so strong a hold of the public mind as to receive the attention of really clever scientific men, many of whom were for awhile misled by it, but still there was nothing more in this than in many other "nine-days wonders." We often see the public led away by specious follies which *will* run their course, and carry many in their train who are afterwards heartily ashamed at having been so easily induced to believe that which patient investigation soon shows to be a mere imposture. The pages of history will furnish many instances of this, but we need not now enlarge upon them.

It was not long, however, before the innocent diversion of Table-turning received the addition of another imposture which deserves a harsher name than mere folly. We mean the pretending to hold converse with departed spirits by means of the intervention of a table. It was soon found that the same mode of operation which caused a table to turn round, would also (as might naturally have been expected) cause it to lift one leg off the ground. This was a discovery which was laid hold of by some silly people, and pushed by degrees to that absurd extreme which is now familiarly known as TABLE-TALKING. It is supposed by foolish people, (and indeed by many who ought to be ashamed of lending the sanction of their influence to such nonsense,) that a spirit can be called from another world by the mere act of a number of persons placing their hands upon an inanimate piece of wood; that the spirit so called "enters into" the table (making a pe-

cular kind of "cracking" noise as it does so), and is then ready to answer any questions that may be put to it; the answers, however, are confined to simple affirmatives, or negatives, the former being indicated by the lifting of one leg and striking it on the floor, and the latter by the table remaining motionless.

This absurdity, to say no worse of it, was for some time confined to the most credulous and most thoughtless of the Table-turners, for religious and sensible people shrank from an exhibition which offended so grossly against their religious feelings and good sense. Curiosity might have led them to join in the attempt to turn a table round by means so novel to them, but they very properly refused to allow their love of the marvellous to betray them into impiety.

Most deeply, therefore, do we now regret to find that two clergymen of the Church of England have lent the sanction of their position as ministers, to assist in extending the pernicious effects of this folly. The Rev. N. S. GODFREY, the Incumbent of Wortley, Leeds; and the Rev. E. GILLSON, the Curate of Lyncombe and Widcombe, Bath, have published pamphlets for the purpose of proving that Table-moving is the result of Satanic agency. Before offering any remarks upon these works, we will give a few extracts which will sufficiently show their nature and style.

The following passage is from Mr. Godfrey's first pamphlet:—

"On Thursday evening, 16th June, my wife, my curate, and myself, sat down at a quarter past nine p.m., and placed our hands upon a small round mahogany table.

The top was about twelve inches in diameter, and it stood upon a tripod stand without castors. I was exceedingly sceptical as to the fact of electricity being the moving power, and therefore was prepared, should we succeed, to test that fact. I should also say we had previously tried several times and failed. At ten o'clock the table began to move. I immediately summoned our female servants (two in number) and also our National Schoolmaster, in order that they might witness whatever should take place. It was agreed that I should direct the movements of the table. I first commanded it to move round to the right, to the left, to go to the door, to the window, to move forward without turning, to turn slower or faster, in order to make sure that I really had power to cause the table to obey me. Every one in the room being satisfied that I had, I then commanded it to stand on one leg, to move forward on one leg, to move forward on its three legs, successively, to rock quickly from side to side, to turn *to* me, to turn *from* me, to throw a hat off in a given direction,—all which commands it implicitly obeyed! I then told it to move toward each servant in succession, to lift up the leg opposite each person named, which it did. I then said, if 'F—— (a female servant) is in the room, knock three times on the floor with this leg,' naming the leg. It slowly rose and did as it was commanded. 'If Mr. M. (the schoolmaster) is in the room, knock three times quicker.' It knocked twice quicker, I was watching it, and observed it did not knock the third time. I said, 'It's wrong now,'—when I found that Mr. M—— to test it, had slipped out of the room.

I now felt convinced that electricity had nothing to do with the matter, and resolved upon a different course of experiment. I spoke to the table and said, 'If you move by electricity, stop.' It stopped instantly! I commanded it to go on again, and said, while it was moving, 'If an evil spirit cause you to move, stop.' It moved round without stopping! I again said, 'If there be any evil agency in this, stop.' It went as before. I was now prepared for a further experiment of a far more solemn character. I whispered to the schoolmaster to bring a small Bible and to lay it on the table when I should tell him. I then caused the table to revolve rapidly, and gave the signal, *The Bible was gently laid on the table, and it instantly stopped!* We were horror struck. However, I determined to persevere. I had other books in succession laid on the table to see whether the fact of a book lying upon it altered any of the conditions under which it revolved,—it went round with them without making any difference! I then tried with the Bible four different times, and each time with the same result: *it would not move so long as that precious volume lay upon it.*

"We then discontinued for a time our connection with the table; and three others in the room laid their hands upon it. It immediately began to move. I then presented fine needle points to it, to ascertain if there were electricity. I placed a piece of raw silk upon it: not a fibre was disturbed. I then placed the Bible on myself: it again stopped, and went round on its removal, as before.

“As it was now past eleven o'clock, we left off and had supper. During supper, other tests suggested themselves, and about twenty minutes before twelve we three laid our hands on again. I commanded the table to move, and it immediately began as before. I now said ‘If there be a hell, I command you to knock on the floor with this leg (the one next me) twice:’ it was motionless. ‘If there be not hell, knock twice:’ no answer. ‘If there be a devil knock twice:’ no motion. ‘If there be not a devil, knock twice:’ *to our horror, the leg slowly rose and knocked twice!* I then said, ‘In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, if there be *no* devil, knock twice:’ it was motionless. This I tried four several times, and each time with the same result. I then asked other questions—‘If there be a heaven, knock twice.’ If there be not a heaven, ‘If there be not an eternity,’ ‘If the soul live after death.’ To not one of these questions could I get an answer. I then asked it to tell me the hour—the leg knocked eleven times. I then said, ‘Tell me what time Mr. — came home to-day.’ It began: I said ‘No, not that leg, the next.’ It changed that leg, and struck *four*, the exact hour. I then said, ‘tell me the day of the month:’ it commenced—I said ‘Quicker:’ it quickened, and at length it came fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, and after a slight pause, it rose very slowly and fell the seventeenth time. I said ‘It is wrong now, I do think you (my wife) must have been unconsciously pressing it;’ but Mr. — (the curate) looked at his watch and said, ‘No, it’s right; it’s about three minutes past twelve.’

“Thus ended our experiment. An experiment in which my simple object was to ascertain if possible the moving power, and to satisfy myself as to what the cause of so extraordinary a phenomenon might be. I confess I was hardly prepared for so successful a result. Nor do I conceive how we can possibly escape from the conclusion, that this power so intelligent, must result from some agency of a higher order than any magnetic fluid. But even were it not so, the fact that the Sacred Volume stopped it, while other books produced no effect upon it, shows that even if it be merely what is called animal magnetism, it is a power opposed to God!”

Surely a clergyman must have extraordinary ideas of religion to use such language as this *before his household*. Does Mr. Godfrey require the confirmation of a talking table to satisfy his mind upon such questions as whether there be a heaven or a hell; ‘if there be an eternity,’ or ‘if the soul live after death?’ we could refer him to a volume where these questions are sufficiently answered. He will find there as much as it is intended, or fit for us to know of the “deep things of God.”

Let us now turn to Mr. Gillson’s account of a similar performance:—

“We accordingly met last Friday evening (Sept. 2, 1853), seven in number. I had never before witnessed any experiment in Table-turning, and therefore requested those who had been accustomed to it to commence operations. Their hands had not been on the table many minutes, before a cracking was heard, and this was immediately followed by a slight movement of a very peculiar

character. It was a sort of heaving, straining motion in the table. A question was then put, and an answer immediately given. I placed my hand upon the table, and asked a variety of questions, all of which were instantly and correctly answered. Various ages were asked, and all correctly told. In reply to trifling questions, possessing no particular interest, the table answered by quietly lifting up the leg, and rapping. But in answer to questions of a more exciting character, it would become violently agitated, and sometimes to such a degree that I can only describe the motion by the word *frantic*.

“ I inquired, Are you a departed spirit ?

“ The answer was, Yes ; indicated by a rap.

“ Are you unhappy ?

“ The table answered by a sort of writhing motion, which no natural power over it could imitate.

“ It was then asked, shall you be for ever unhappy ?

“ The same kind of writhing motion was returned.

“ Are you a fallen angel ? No answer, which indicated a negative.

“ Do you know the fallen angels ? Yes.

“ Are they more powerful than you ? Yes.

“ Are you obliged to obey them ? Yes.

“ Do you like their society ? Yes.

“ Do you know Satan ? Yes.

“ Is he the Prince of Devils ? Yes.

“ Will he be bound ? Yes.

“ Will he be cast into the abyss ? Yes.

“ Will you be cast in with him ? Yes.

“ How long will it be before he is cast out ? He rapped ten.

“ Will wars and commotions intervene ?

“ The table rocked and reeled backwards and forwards for a length of time, as if it intended a pantomimic acting of the prophet’s prediction :—

The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage ; and the transgression thereof shall be heavy upon it ; and it shall fall, and not rise again.*

“ I then asked, where are Satan’s head-quarters ? Are they in England ? There was a slight movement.

“ Are they in France ? A violent movement.

“ Are they in Spain ? Similar agitation.

“ Are they at Rome ? The table literally seemed frantic.

“ At the close of these experiments, which occupied about two hours, the invisible agent, in answer to some questions about himself, did not agree with what had been said before. I therefore asked,

“ Are you the same spirit that was in the table when we began ? No.

“ How many spirits have been in the table this evening ? Four.

“ This spirit informed us that he had been an infidel, and that he embraced Popery about five years before his death. Amongst other questions, he was asked,

“ Do you know the Pope ? The table was violently agitated.

“ I asked how long will Popery continue ?

“ He rapped ten ; exactly coinciding with the other spirit’s account of the binding of Satan.

“ Many questions were asked, and experiments tried, in

* Is. xxiv. 20.

order to ascertain whether the results would agree with Mr. Godfrey's, and on every occasion they did, especially that of stopping the movement of the table with the Bible. The table was engaged in rapping out a number, but the instant the divine volume was laid upon it the movement ceased. When the Bible was removed it went on. This was repeatedly tried, and invariably with the same result. Other books were laid upon the table, similar in size and shape to the Bible, but without any effect.

“As we proceeded with our questions, we found an indescribable facility in the conversation, from the extraordinary intelligence and ingenuity displayed in the table, *e.g.*, I inquired if many devils were posted in Bath.

“He replied by the most extraordinary and rapid knocking of the three feet in succession, round and round for some time, as if to intimate that they were innumerable.

“I asked, Can you give me your name? Yes.

“Give me the first letter by rapping the number from the beginning of the alphabet? It was instantly done.

“The second letter? It was given.

“I would not allow him to proceed, because he had told us that his relations lived in Bath, and I thought it might lead to very painful feelings if the name were given.

“However, it is needless to multiply particulars. I might enumerate scores, if not hundreds, of questions which were instantly answered in a similar manner. After the table was put into motion, the answers were instantly given at the slightest touch of one or more hands, but it would not answer without a hand being in contact with

it. Moreover, it was perfectly obedient to every word of command. It would either walk, or stop, or turn or rap, in perfect obedience to every direction given."

Mr. Godfrey does not appear to have been so highly favoured by the spirits as Mr. Gillson, for we find in his second pamphlet that one spirit "told a parcel of lies," (p. 25;) another was asked several questions which were "all lazily answered, and all wrong," (p. 33.) This spirit was therefore "sent away, and commanded to send another more intelligent." The new comer was, however, not much better, for it answered "some questions correctly, others nonsensically," (p. 34.) At page 35, Mr. Godfrey remarks in a note, "I must here observe that in this case, as in that of Alfred Brown (one of the spirits so named), every enquiry has been made to ascertain the truth of these statements, *but without success*" !!!

At page 38, we find a spirit being asked :—

"How many lies have you told us to-night?"

"The table rapped briskly 38 times."

"How many truths?"

"Very slowly 6."

Now when it is borne in mind that the great bulk of the answers are plain "Yes," or "No," the above results can hardly be thought very satisfactory, for it would be strange if one of these two answers did not *sometimes* come in the right place. If it should, why there's a miracle at once; if not, it is passed over.

Sometimes, however, Mr. Godfrey succeeds in getting a spirit sufficiently tractable to hold a conversation, of which the following is a specimen :—

- " Are you an evil spirit ? Yes.
 " Are you one cast out by Jesus ? No answer.
 " Are you one of Legion ? No answer.
 " Were you one of those who entered into the swine ?
 No answer.
 " Are mad men possessed by devils ? Yes.
 " Is epilepsy possession ? Yes.
 " Can you break this table ? No.
 " Can you move the table without our hands ? Yes.
 " We took our hands off and commanded it to move.
 It did not. We replaced our hands, and I asked,
 " Is it necessary to place our hands on the table ? No.
 " Why don't you move the table when our hands are
 off? Are you restrained ? Yes.
 " By whom ? By the devil ? Yes.
 " Are you one of those seducing spirits spoken of by
 St. Paul ? Yes.
 " Are you in suffering ? Yes.
 " Are you the spirit of a dead person ? Yes.
 " Have you been in hell ? Yes.
 " Are you one of the angels cast out from heaven ?
 No.
 " Are you a lost soul ? Yes.
 " Have you power to come into and to leave this table ?
 Yes.
 " Do you go into the earth ? Yes.
 " Do you go into the abyss ? No answer.
 " Do you go back into hell ? Yes.
 " Are you compelled to answer questions ? Yes.
 " Does God compel you to answer questions ? Yes.

- “ Do you like to answer me ? *Yes.**
- “ Shall you be sorry when you leave here ? *Yes.*
- “ Are you happier in the presence of God’s people ?
Yes, (decidedly).
- “ Are you more happy here than when you are away
from here ? *Yes.*
- “ Must you come again if told by Satan ? *Yes.*
- “ Does God compel you to come now ? *Yes.*
- “ Do you come for a good purpose ? *Yes.*
- “ Are you compelled by God to come to tell us that
Table-Turning is of the Devil ? *Yes.*
- “ Could you be called without the Table ? *Yes.*
- “ Could you appear ? *Yes.*
- “ I commanded it to appear, but it did not.
- “ Does Satan prevent you from appearing ? *Yes.*
- “ Could you answer with the Bible on you ? *No.*
- “ Is there a difference between lost spirits ? *Yes.*
- “ Are there any more miserable than you ? *Yes,*
(very decidedly.)
- “ Are there any lost spirits less miserable than you ?
Yes, (faintly).
- “ Are evil angels more under Satan’s power than
spirits ? *Yes.*
- “ Are you compelled to obey Satan ? *Yes.*
- “ Are you tormented in the sight of heaven ? *Yes.*
- “ Can you see heaven ? *Yes.*
- “ Can you enter heaven ? *No.*
- “ Can Satan enter heaven ? *Yes, (very decidedly).*

* When the answer is in Italics, it signifies that a peculiar emphasis was discernible in the motion of the leg.

“Is Satan the Accuser of the Brethren? Yes, (most decidedly, the table nearly overturned itself).

“Do you wish to confess that Jesus Christ our Lord is come in the flesh? *Yes.*

“(The most emphatic answer given; the Table again nearly overturned itself, and remained poised on its two legs for about ten seconds.)

“Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ? *Yes.*

“Does that belief make you unhappy? *Yes,*

(very decidedly.)

“Can anything release you from your condition? *No.*

“Can we do anything to better your condition? *No.*

“Is there any end to your unhappiness? *No,*

(very decidedly).

“Is our Saviour’s description of your unhappiness true?

Yes, (most decidedly)

“Did you hear the gospel while you were alive? *Yes.*

“Were you a Sunday School Teacher? *No.*

“Did you attend a Sunday School? *Yes.*

“Do you now believe what you learnt there was true?

Yes.

“Can you promise to come again? *No.*

“Should you like to come again? *Yes.*

“If I want you to come again, and command you by your name, ‘Alfred Brown,’ can you come? *No answer.*

“Will you come again if I summon you in God’s name?

Yes.

“Is it in my power to call you again? *No.*

“Can God compel you to come again? *Yes.*

“Am I wrong to summon you? *No.*

“ Am I wrong to summon you often ? *Yes.*

“ Is Hell, fire and brimstone, as Christ has told us ? *Yes.*

“ Is it a literal torment as our Lord Jesus has described it? *Yes.* (The table nearly overturned.)”

Now the first reflection that will probably occur to the mind of the reader is the extreme impropriety of the questions asked. As to the answers, they are of very little consequence, and not very marvellous, when we consider the manner in which they are given. Sometimes the table is altogether silent, sometimes it gives an answer that will suit, but just as often one that will not; then again many of the facts are of a nature that does not admit of their being verified; and they therefore may or may not be true, just as it happens. From what Mr. Godfrey admits in the note to page 35 (quoted above), it will be seen how very small a proportion of the answers may be considered successful, for even those that appear to be reasonable may be found on enquiry to be untrue. It will be observed, in the conversation given above, that at some of the answers the table is said to have been so “emphatic as nearly to have overturned itself.” Now this is just what we should expect from the nature of the question, when considered in connection with the knowledge that all these movements of the table proceed entirely from the nervous action of the operators; for who could hear a clergyman deliberately and solemnly ask a piece of wood if it “wished to confess that Jesus Christ our Lord is come in the flesh,” or whether Hell “is a literal torment as our Lord Jesus has described it,” with-

out feeling so awe-struck at the blasphemous folly in which he is taking a part, that his nervous system might well give a shudder sufficient to produce the effect described.

It is upon such very imperfect results as these that Messrs. Godfrey and Gillson proceed to build their assumption—that Table-moving is the result of Satanic agency—and fortify themselves by sundry quotations from the Apocalypse, the usual refuge of all who deal in the now popular art of mystification.

We will not follow these reverend gentlemen in a discussion in which they so soon get out of their depth, we will simply ask them what *practical good* do they hope will result from the publication of such pamphlets as those that they have put forth? Do they *really* think that such mountebank tricks as these are the sort of wonders of which God will condescend to make use in order to attract the attention of men; or is there anything in the Bible which would lead us to expect that the gospel will ever be enforced upon man by the agency of departed spirits? How conclusive upon this subject is the reply given to the rich man who requested that Lazarus might be sent to warn his brethren,—“If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.”

We will charitably hope that both these reverend gentlemen are really good, though weak men, and that they have allowed themselves to be carried away by their feelings, and the excitement of the moment, and so far this may be allowed to stand as their excuse, poor as it is. They ought, however, to have considered the responsibility

which attaches to the publication of such pamphlets as these by men in their situations, before they allowed them to go forth. We have now lying before us other pamphlets, upon the same subject, written by laymen; but of these we have taken no notice, (except in the case of a brief quotation from one of them) because we felt that they were not calculated to do so much harm as those to which we have confined ourselves. They are merely written by private individuals, and therefore carry no weight with them beyond their own ridiculous arguments, but when clergymen who are supposed by virtue of their office to be men of education, are found to write seriously and earnestly upon a subject, it commands a certain amount of attention, be the folly even as great as that of supposing that a piece of wood can become the interpreter of revelation; and they ought, therefore, to be doubly careful that all that emanates from their pens is not only well-considered, but also that its *tendency* is to benefit mankind—to advance religion—or to promote some other good purpose. Neither of these ends is answered by the works in question, and we feel sure that if either Mr. Godfrey or Mr. Gillson could be made aware of one-tenth part of the mischief that their publications have done, and are doing, they would most heartily regret the indiscretion of which they were guilty in allowing them to go forth.

We are now putting the most favourable construction possible upon the case; we will not for a moment suppose that the pecuniary advantage derived from an extensive sale has any influence upon them whatever, but that their laugh at the folly of the operators,—who could believe

motive for the publication arises, as Mr. Gillson has expressed it, from "a sense of duty as a watchman on the city walls." We fully agree with him that "a Christian minister, who deserves the name, could not discover that his people were unconsciously playing with evil spirits and fail to give them warning;" but does it not occur to him that he would be discharging his duty as a watchman with far more benefit to his people if he would take such a course as should *prevent* their "playing with spirits," instead of allowing his credulity to get the better of his judgment, and urge him to spread the delusion still wider. Would it not be a more practically useful work to direct attention to "the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith," than to occupy the mind so entirely with the contemplation of the mysterious parts of religion, about which we can none of us feel confident, and even the wisest and best can only say that they see "through a glass darkly?" Would it not be better to occupy ourselves with the plain truths of the gospel, and endeavour as far as possible, to act up to its precepts, and leave alone the study of the less profitable points of mere speculation, such as the existence or not of "wandering spirits," &c.

These arguments apply merely to the *publication* of these pamphlets, even supposing that the tables *were* moved by a spiritual agency; but when it is borne in mind that the "rapping" is produced entirely by the involuntary muscular action of the operators themselves, and that there is nothing supernatural whatever in it, the whole affair becomes so supremely ridiculous, that were it not for the sacred character of the subject, we should but

that they were talking to a piece of wood and receiving answers from it? What a sight for those who think we have emerged from the "dark ages," to see a number of persons with the clergyman of their parish at their head, sitting round a table and propounding to it sundry questions upon matters of religious faith, with a credulity far exceeding the blindest devotion ever paid to a heathen oracle!

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