

A FEW SOBER WORDS

OF

TABLE-TALK

ABOUT

TABLE-SPIRITS,

AND THE

REV. N. S. GODFREY'S INCANTATIONS.

BY

JOHN PRICHARD,

FELLOW OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS.

"Delight in deceiving and aptness to be deceived, imposture and credulity, although they appear to be of a diverse nature, yet certainly, for the most part, do they concur."—BACON.

"The earth hath bubbles as the water hath, and these are of them."
—SHAKESPEARE.

LONDON: SIMPKIN AND MARSHALL.

LEAMINGTON: AT ALL THE LIBRARIES.

LEEDS: WALKER. BATH: PEACH. CHELTENHAM: WIGHT AND BAILEY.

LEAMINGTON:

PRINTED BY G. C. LIEBENROOD, COURIER OFFICE.

1853.

Price Sixpence.

T A B L E - T A L K .

"TABLE-TURNING, the Devil's Modern Master-piece!"* Such is the startling title of a little work, which has gone through several editions, and which professes to prove by experiments, that, in these our days, the spirits of the departed, doomed to everlasting perdition, have taken up their abode in the tables of our drawing rooms, and may readily be summoned and catechised, at the call of any one curious to know of the hidden things of darkness and futurity. At first sight, such a statement would appear so glaringly stamped by its consummate absurdity, that it may well be left to wait the oblivion to which, in common with a legion of frauds of a like nature, the good sense of the public will assuredly and speedily consign it, but, on looking a little further, and seeing that a teacher of our Established Church, and still more, a man in all the learning of the schools pre-eminent, has not been ashamed to subscribe himself the author, it did appear to me that he who would trouble himself to expose this wicked folly, may do some service to the cause of common sense and sobriety, and still more to that of religion.

Now it is perfectly clear that Table-talking is but the sequel to Table-moving. No one, I think, will deny that, but for the wondrous exploits of these useful articles of furniture in the way of locomotion, we should never have heard of their being possessed by any other spirits than such as may be considered their legitimate burden; neither would our sympathies have been seriously demanded for any other sufferings under which they may have writhed † than those orthodox groanings

* Table-Turning, the Devil's Modern Master-piece! being the Result of a Course of Experiments. By the Rev. N. S. GODFREY, S. C. L., of St. Catharine Hall, Cambridge, and Incumbent of Wortley, Leeds.

† We all felt that there was almost human pathos in the movements of the table by Alfred Brown or *Bripalèt*. In page 31, Professor Schaubertz tells us that "The ladies complained that it was painful to see the torture inflicted on that poor cherry-tree table."—*Mr. Godfrey's Pamphlet*.

which, from time immemorial, they have been wont to utter under the grateful loads of civic hospitality.

Taking it, then, for granted, that but for this newly-discovered locomotive power, we should have still been in ignorance of the "great fact" set before the world in the pamphlet before us, we will begin at the beginning, and enter a little into the question—What is Table-turning? Is it the result of Mesmerism—of Electricity—or of Satanic Agency? Or is it the result of an influence proceeding from, and perfectly explicable by, the acknowledged laws of matter and of physiological science? Each of these explanations, diametrically opposed as they are to one another, numbers its votaries and its disciples. Let us examine them in the order we have named them. First, then, as to Mesmeric Influence. Before we proceed one step in this inquiry, we must come to some definition as to what Mesmeric Influence is. That influence, then, which has been named after the man who long ago made it and himself too conspicuous for the credit of either, would appear to consist in a want of healthy balance, produced under certain conditions of mind, between the voluntary and the involuntary, or the automatic functions of the nervous system. The mental condition essential for these effects is that in which there is a concentration of thought upon one phenomenon or set of phenomena to the prejudice of all duly balanced exercise of mental energy for the time being: to use the words of a highly-gifted author, one of the polished pillars of our medical Alhambra,—“The consciousness receives, as it were, a local impulse and direction; remains fixed on one spot with more or less intenseness, and for a longer or shorter time, and produces effects, not merely on the sensations thence derived, but, seemingly, also, on the physical state and functions of the parts concerned.”* By the same author, the mind of a person thus influenced is well said to be in a state of “expectant attention.”

“Coming events cast their shadows before.”

As may have been anticipated, these effects are producible exactly in proportion to the degree of nervous sensitiveness exhibited in the constitutions of those upon whom they may be tried, hence hysterical women form the staple stock-in-trade of the itinerant mesmeriser. “Here,” to quote Dr. Holland, “the attention, no longer guided—or, if at all, partially and interruptedly—by the rational will, becomes submitted to the vague and almost automatic conditions of the sensorium just described; the actions upon it from with-

* Chapters on Mental Physiology. Page 14.—*Sir Henry Holland.*

out, and the reflected acts and movements thereby induced, form a very extraordinary passage in the history of the human mind." * But these undeniable effects having been produced and acknowledged, human invention and human credulity have stepped in, and attempted to found upon them a superstructure of fraud and falsehood, alike revolting to the common sense of well-directed minds, and disgraceful to our common nature. The miracles of Clairvoyance were not less slow to follow in the wake of Mesmeric discoveries, than have been the miracles of untenanting Hell, and peopling our tables with the spirits of the departed, to follow in that of 'Table-locomotion. It is easier, however, to attribute palpable and evident effects to a cause having no reference to them, than to establish as "a great fact" effects which really exist only in the ill-balanced sensorium of some idle and ignorant dreamer. "Another point in this question, not sufficiently kept in mind, is the vast distinction between the two classes of Mesmeric phenomena—sleep, reverie, trance, &c.—and the miraculous assumption of Clairvoyance, prophecy and other powers, superseding all the physical laws of time and space of which we have any knowledge; there is less distinction between the intellect of an infant and that of Bacon, Newton, or Laplace, than between the conditions thus brought into pretended connexion."† The "great fact" of Clairvoyance, however, has long buried itself beneath the weight of its own lying revelations; neither has the noble and lamented Franklin, with his ill-fated and gallant crew, returned to verify its power; nor has the same power succeeded in claiming the two hundred pound note, waiting only for the boasted revelation of its number, to become the reward of a newly-discovered faculty. Such, then, is Mesmerism, stripped of the garb with which fraud and credulity have invested it, and it will at once be acknowledged, bearing in mind what has been already stated, that to such shall we look in vain for a solution of the problem of Table-moving, since Mesmeric Influence can only be exerted on the unbalanced mental energy of a sentient being. None ought to have known better than Mr. Godfrey that before a "great fact"—a fact in direct contradiction to the sober experience of many centuries, and equally opposed to every known law, physical and physiological—is set forth for reception by the human mind, the acknowledged laws of evidence should be stringently brought to bear upon its claims to truth. In the case of Clairvoyance, these claims have been tested and found utterly wanting; and, in the case of Table-Spirits, they will be found to be equally worthless, although infinitely more wicked and absurd. Secondly, as to Electricity, as the source

* Chapters on Mental Physiology. Page 30.—*Sir H. Holland.*

† Chapters on Mental Physiology. Page 32.—*Sir H. Holland.*

of Mesmeric Influence. We have, happily, here brought to bear upon our subject, a science amenable to known and fixed laws. We shall merely, therefore, state that as the moving of tables has been proved to exist independently of, and at variance with, any such laws, the argument at once falls to the ground; and we must pass on to the next, and third, implied source—Satanic Agency—and here let us introduce what we have to say with a few prefatory remarks. Whilst I honour and respect the mind which knows and feels that

"There are more things in heaven and earth
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Whilst I would regard the "Ideal," duly exercised and duly balanced, as a scintillation of the beauty and brightness of the "Divine," shedding its radiance o'er many a rugged path in man's journey through life, giving colours to the rainbow and depth to the infinite; so would I deprecate in the strongest terms the wild and mischievous fancies of a mid-day dreamer, who could have the audacity to palm upon the public, on the strength of a few crude, contradictory, and easily refuted experiments, the startling news that our household furniture is become the habitation of devils, and that the table round which many an hour of innocent mirth has been passed, and many a circle of loving friends has sat, has been all this time writhing and groaning under the tortures of the damned.—Mr. Godfrey commences his statement by a discussion on Faith and Infidelity, and, to my uninitiated mind, (uninitiated I would say in the mysteries of Mr. Godfrey's diabolic apparitions,) most blasphemously institutes a parallel between this ridiculous fable of yesterday, and those sublime and awful truths which have gained depth and width from the lapse of ages and the spread of knowledge, in which alone the good man can find his reward, and by which alone the wanderer can be comforted and reclaimed. How sad, how degrading is the reflection, that an authorised teacher of these wondrous yet simple truths, has stepped out of the path in which he may have imparted a knowledge whose value is priceless, to renew in our ears the forgotten and foolish fables of our infancy! In drawing the parallel to which I have alluded, did it never occur to Mr. Godfrey that he may be putting a weapon into the hands of Satan indeed? Could such a parallel be supposed to have any weight with rational beings, the cause of infidelity would indeed be not meanly served by him who should ever have been found in the foremost rank of its opposers. When not only Mr. Godfrey, but other Clergymen of like mental calibre, threaten to pollute our libraries, our drawing-rooms, and even our pulpits, with such wretched fantasies as these, it is time that some one

should step forward to expose the folly and to unmask the fraud. Mr. Godfrey proceeds to prove the individuality of the Evil One, and I conclude that, as he sets out with this problem, he considers it an essential in his "new doctrine"—now may I ask Mr. Godfrey if the individuality of angels is not laid down with equal authority in Scripture? If the personal appearance of Satan at "the Temptation" is quoted on the one side, may not the personal presence of angels at the tomb, be instanced on the other? Our author, however, gives us, with due candour, two quotations which render unnecessary any further examination of this point, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister to them who shall be heirs of salvation;" and "He shall give His angels charge concerning thee." If, then, the argument for the personality of evil spirits is valid, the same argument may be extended to good angels also; and here, as a Protestant Churchman, I ask Mr. Godfrey how he can dare, consistently with his "new doctrines," to deny to the members of another Church the miraculous agency which they claim in their weeping Madonnas, and their still bleeding Saints? Let me not be misunderstood,—the drops of blood oozing from the time-honoured canvass of a Carlo Dolci, or a Caracci, and the revelations of Mr. Godfrey's drawing-room table, are equally the fruits of a too-credulous imagination and a fraudulent purpose, and I believe that many a conscientious and devout Roman Catholic would give, if he had it, the value of all the Carlo Dolci's and all the Caracci's in Europe to wipe away from his Church this stain on its humanized religion. Mr. Godfrey, however, claims for his table the fact that it is the abiding place of evil spirits (unless, indeed, he means to claim the honour for himself) whilst, as a good Protestant, he would, doubtless, lash, as they deserve, the well-known fables which I will venture to call foul blots on the Roman Catholic Church, by which they have peopled their almost inspired canvass with "ministering angels," and imposed upon the devout credulity of thousands.

Surely Mr. Godfrey has put a weapon here into the hands of the Romanist, if the Romanist will condescend, as I do not think he will, to use it. But let us proceed to examine Mr. Godfrey's "great fact," and his proofs. The possessed table has been answering questions in *the assumed affirmative* by kicking up its leg, and in *the assumed negative* by behaving itself peaceably as tables should do,* when our author enters upon the scene—*sometimes*, says he, *these answers were given*

* Mr. Godfrey's rapid acquirement of the language of demons is marvellous. Now suppose the kick should be "No," and the stand-at-ease "Yes!" and why not, since Mr. Godfrey tells us the table is a sad liar, after all.

correctly, sometimes incorrectly. An alphabet is procured, and Mr. Godfrey seriously sets to work, laying himself down on the floor, by the side of his alphabetic lesson. Here, like Hamlet before the mimic stage,

“He eats the air, promise-crammed.”

He then requests one of the *three* persons at the table to command it to spell the Christian names of Mr. L., of B., by lifting up the leg next him as he pointed to the letters of the alphabet in succession, neither of the three persons having ever heard of Mr. L., of B. Then, says our able experimentalist, “*In order that there might be no possibility of trick, or collusion, one person always looked over me, whilst I pointed, and I kept the pointer about three seconds on each letter in succession.*” Wise experimentalist! candid Mr. Godfrey! did it never occur to you that a screen between yourself and the gentlemen at the table would have been a somewhat more satisfactory mean of avoiding collusion than that *one person always looking over you whilst you pointed*? How remarkable is it that, in these cases of self-delusion, we so frequently find circumstances set forth as conclusive of truth, which, on examination, afford us the very clue to unravel the falsehood. It would have looked far better for Mr. Godfrey’s capabilities, as a rational enquirer, had he cut off this sentient link between his own manipulations and the “expectant attention” doubtless evinced by the manipulators at the table. Every one acquainted with a few conjuror’s tricks, and, more especially, every one conversant with the external manifestations of the workings of mind upon matter, will readily grant that, to an eye of ordinary acuteness, the trembling, or the prolonged, or the anxious, or the some way or other significant touch of an operator in Mr. Godfrey’s situation, would give the clue to the letters on which his mind was at the moment intensely concentrated. I have been, in my day, not an inapt performer at the game of Proverbs, and I know that there is almost always, however it may be attempted to conceal it, such a peculiarity in the mode of utterance of the required word, or such an expression of countenance during its utterance as to make the task of the questioner not a very abstruse one. But, it will be said, what right have you to charge any one with wilful collusion in a fraud? And, for what object could such a collusion have been adopted? Now, I am not prepared to say that fraudulent collusion absolutely occurred, although the facts, as given, *savour strongly* of such a probability. It is possible that the chain of “expectant attention,” which Mr. Godfrey has shewn to have been complete, may have simultaneously been put into action at the moment when the trembling index of the pointer

touched the required letters. But, if there was collusion, it may be asked—for what object? Medical men are mostly familiar with a set of cases in which, under the influence of a peculiar temperament, there exists a habit and intense desire of imposture, amounting, in a degree, to moral insanity, and it is scarcely credible to what extent, and with what apparent *sang froid* bodily suffering will be endured without a sigh or a moan by the actors in this singular exhibition. In some minds, also, there is a morbid craving for the marvellous, which plays its part with as much constancy as that exhibited by these extraordinary actors, and, certainly, with far more self-delusion. In a word, I take the liberty of suggesting that in the person “looking over” Mr. Godfrey we may discover a satisfactory solution of the whole evening’s amusement. But, to proceed, another party is now brought on the scene, one Alfred Brown, long departed, is most unceremoniously summoned from the regions of Hell to go through a somewhat tedious lesson of orthography, and marvellously well does he spell his own name, taking all the circumstances into consideration; but, alas! the invoked spirit soon goes on, according to the history with which we are favoured, to make sad mistakes, and to enlighten his admiring companions with “*a parcel of lies*.”* I cannot forbear to give one quotation more from Mr. Godfrey’s sickening tale—“*What is the name of the person he called upon? Here we had, first, a COMPLETE JUMBLE OF LETTERS; but, ON VARYING THE FORM OF THE QUESTION, we obtained Mr. V.’s name as above.*” Mr. Godfrey uses the National School alphabet for his lesson-book on this eventful evening, let me recommend him (if he is determined to stand by his Spirits, and has any hope that the thinking public will back him) before he again rushes into print for the purpose of chronicling their supernatural doings, to employ the National Schoolmaster also in his service—a few hours of drill may possibly greatly improve a style of spelling for which unquestionably any blubbing schoolboy would have got his reward in the shape of a sound thrashing. A little more consistency of tale also would add somewhat to the dignity of these ætherial visitors; a few discreet hints on this score may result in a more plausible history than such as follows:—“*Are you compelled by God 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*

* Among other questions asked was this:—What is the name of the person on whom Mr. G. has called to day? A. Spelt distinctly, V—11, M—Answered “Yes” to place, street, and square. Now, Mr. G. had not been there; and Mr. V.’s house is No. 1, not No. 11; yet what could have made the table spell his name? Again, “It told a parcel of lies about what he was doing, as we have since ascertained; yet, from its answers, we obtained a most plausible narrative, of which the following is the substance.”—*Table-Turning, by the Rev. N. S. Godfrey.*

it to appear and it did not.—Does God compel you to come now? Yes.—Does the Devil send you here? Yes.—Does he send you here for the purpose of deceiving us? Yes.—Somewhat inconsistent authorities these, and I think it must be admitted, slightly inconsistent errands. Had Mr. Godfrey known anything of the laws of evidence, he would not have been slow to detect the cause of Mr. Brown's inaccuracy; but no, he is determined to spend an evening with the Devil, and a wilful man will have his way. Candid Mr. Godfrey! (for candid you unquestionably are, or you would not have thus opened a side door through which you have given us a peep behind the scenes,) what can be your estimate of the human understanding, when you would rest upon such tricky evidence as this the truth of a "great fact?" a fact which would, being true, uproot the prescribed order of nature, reveal to us before the time the hidden mysteries of another state, and inevitably fill ten times over the wards of every lunatic asylum in the world. For our happiness, however, although it may be for Mr. Godfrey's discomfiture, these things are mercifully kept from us in this our earthly abode; it is not every mind which could look unappalled on scenes which Mr. Godfrey believes, and would have others believe, that he witnessed. He seems to have been as strong in presence of mind as unquestionably he has shown himself to be weak in his powers of inductive reasoning. I have been too much shocked and disgusted with the other scenes given, in which the mysteries of heaven and hell are blasphemously made the subjects of conversation between Mr. Godfrey and his raised spirit, to authorise their re-print for the public eye, but I think I am bound, in justification of the terms I have used, to transcribe one passage which may fairly be left to speak for itself to the mind of every right-thinking person:—"Can it be that this is the beginning of Satan's last struggle, that on the imposition of hands the table is endued with power from the Devil, as the Lord's servants, on the imposition of hands, were, in the Apostles' days, endued with power from on high? I merely ask, Can it be?"—but I think every reader will say with me, "jam satis." I shudder whilst I think that a scholar, a gentleman, and, above all, a Divine, has given to the world a statement of proceedings at once distressing to the minds of thinking men, and disgraceful to the character of their author as a rational being, far more as a teacher in our excellent and venerable Church.—One only further quotation, and I have done. "*Is epilepsy possession?*" Ans. "*Yes.*" It would have been well had Mr. Godfrey paused for awhile before giving to the world assertions calculated, if believed, to destroy the happiness of many a poor sufferer by a thrust

which any reckless hand may make, but the effects of which may not be relieved by the best appointed remedies ?

Is then the epilepsy of the teething infant possession ? Is the epilepsy of gastric irritation possession ? Is the epilepsy from organic causes possession ? If so, I can only say that, in the two first named cases especially, the lancet and the dose may claim a power beyond any that has been hitherto heard of in the schools, unless indeed the opinion of Cicero may be said to invest them with some such potency

"In nulla re homines proprius ad Deos accedunt quam in salutem hominibus dando."

Having stated what Table-Moving is *not*, let us now enquire what it *is*, and this at once introduces the fourth and last question—"Is it the result of an influence proceeding from, and perfectly explicable by, the acknowledged laws of matter and physiological science?" I have no doubt that it is so. Professor Faraday has taken some ingenious trouble to demonstrate to the public this simple truth, but as in the time of Hudibras, so now

"The pleasure is as great
Of being cheated as to cheat."

And the public will not readily give up its plaything and its pastime, I am inclined to believe that the nice adaptation of the several fingers upon the table, amounting, in the case of a party of several operators, to no inconsiderable force, partakes somewhat of the character of what chemists call "the attraction of cohesion," and if so, it must very considerably favour the action of any impetus proceeding therefrom ; but, be this as it may, one thing is clear, namely, that the moving power is applied (presuming that the intense concentration of the mind and will gives an automatic impulse to the force in the direction of the movement expected and anxiously waited for) in a manner precisely the best calculated to bring about the result—for this end there should be but little, if any, pressure directly downwards, and it will be readily conceived how the *vis unita* of say fifty fingers, exercised by five persons, having one object and one wish, (even though this power may be automatic, which I grant that in a greater or less degree it is) may be brought to bear in a lateral direction on a table, so as to effect the object looked for. Much that is admitted in Table-turning goes to prove this fact—sceptics have no power—the strong will of one of the operators that the turning shall be contrariwise to the will of the rest, impedes or stops the motion,—tables, hats, chairs, and plates, all having tolerable facilities in their construction for such evolutions, are the articles dignified by these astounding gifts. Perhaps, however, when this genus has been perfected in its modern

accomplishments, side-boards and beds, fenders and fire-screens, may acquire the same extraordinary talent. I venture to surmise, however, that the ponderous character of some of these articles, and the inconvenient form of others, will keep them for a long time in the background. To conclude, it may be said "If (as we grant) such follies as these will ultimately detect themselves, why take the trouble to expose them?" I answer once again, it is because I am aware that the character of the publisher of these follies *ought* to carry with it some weight; and because I can foresee a vast amount of human misery and mental aberration in the reception of these follies, that I have endeavoured to caution the public upon the subject. If I have failed to convince, I know that it has not been from want of honesty of purpose, and I should be well pleased to see the subject so forcibly handled by others, as that, in a very short space of time, and before weak and credulous minds have suffered, Table-turning and Table-talking may be consigned to the tomb of the Capulets, and Mr. Godfrey may be found active in his high and appointed path of duty, instead of getting up other exhibitions of his own folly, and I doubt not, some other person's wickedness. If he will condescend to take up the work from which I have largely quoted, he will, I think, not fail, unless his case is hopeless, to find in it some stay and balance to his morbid imagination; certainly he will, as a scholar, admire the logical reasoning and the elegant language of a learned physician and a Christian gentleman; and should such or other exercises, at length convince him that his Spirits were "thin air and empty fancies," he will, I am sure, at the same time, arrive at the conclusion that he has more than merited what I can truly assure him it has given me pain to write concerning any Minister of revealed religion.

NOTE.—In a letter which Mr. Godfrey has published in the *St. James's Chronicle* I find the following passage:—"If I am wrong I harm no one, I wrong no one." What! Is there "no harm" in promulgating a lie; and, above all, a blasphemous lie? Is there no harm in unbiassing minds as credulous and as weak as his own by such statements? Is there no harm in bringing the truths of Christianity in apposition and direct parallel with the falsehoods of a perverted imagination? Is there no harm in thus putting a weapon into the hands of the infidel and the scoffer? Mr. Godfrey's definition of "no harm" will, he may be assured, be but little responded to by the opinions of the public, before whom he and his diabolic incantations will inevitably be judged.