

The Polynesian.

HONOLULU, SATURDAY, MARCH 17, 1849.

No. 44.

THE POLYNESIAN, published weekly at Honolulu, Oahu, H. I.

TERMS. Single copy, 5 cents; 3 months, \$1.50; 6 months, \$3.00; 1 year, \$6.00.

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF MAGIC, PRODIGES, & APPARENT MIRACLES.

BY ANTHONY TODD THOMPSON, M. D.

From the French of Eusebe Salverte. These are two curious and entertaining volumes, on a subject which has engaged the attention of philosophers and historians in all past ages,—and has not lost its hold on the popular mind, even in the present. The author having in the course of an extensive inquiry, discovered "the fact, that the degree of scientific knowledge existing in an early period of society, was much greater than the moderns are willing to admit,—but that it was confined to the temples, and carefully veiled from the eyes of the people"—has "endeavored to establish a theory which maintains, that the improbability of the prodiges and assumed miracles related by the ancients is not sufficient to authorize their being regarded as fabulous, if that improbability be proved to be only apparent."

The work commences with what may be termed natural marvels; aerolites, gigantic animals, plants possessing hidden virtues, and the large class of beings which have too hastily been pronounced fabulous, but which the researches of modern science and modern travel have proved to be real. Since, therefore, "the apparent miracles related by the ancients," says M. Salverte, "explain themselves naturally, wherefore should their recitals be doubted when they treat of magical performances, which also admit of explanations not less satisfactory?"

Magic, in the very earliest times, so far from being a proscribed study, was viewed as the perfection of human knowledge—"the science which unveils the operations of nature, and leads to the contemplation of celestial powers."

Saint Epiphanius relates that Nimrod, in founding Bactria, established there the sciences of magic and of astronomy, the invention of which was subsequently attributed to Zoroaster. Cassien speaks of a Treatise on Magic which existed in the fifth century, and which is attributed to Ham, the son of Noah! The father of the church, just quoted, places the commencement of Magic and of enchantments as far back as the time of Jared, the fourth from Seth, the son of Adam. Magic holds a prominent place in the traditions of the Hebrews. The ancient inhabitants of the land of Canaan had incurred the divine wrath by their use of enchantments. The Amalekites, fighting with the Hebrews, in their flight from Egypt and Balak besieged in his city by the King of the Ethiopians, and subsequently by Moses, alike resorted to Magic as a mode of defence. The priests of Egypt were looked, even in Hindostan, as the most subtle of all magicians.

From the earliest ages, Magic has obtained the highest consideration in Hindostan. M. Horst establishes the truth, that the collection of the Vedas contains many magical writings. * * * If, from the East, we carry our inquiry Westward and towards the North, we find Magic bearing equal marks of ascendancy and of high antiquity. Under its name, "Occult Science," it was known to the Druids of Great Britain and those of Gaul. Odin, so soon as he had founded his religion in Scandinavia, was regarded there as the inventor of Magic.

Among the Eastern nations and the Egyptians we shall find that occult science made the greatest advances; favoured, doubtless, by the superior civilization of those ancient kingdoms, and also by that speculative character which distinguished, and still distinguishes, the Eastern mind. With these, as was also the case with the witch of the 16th century, "the aim was to gain power, veneration, and an obedience that knew no bounds. After having conquered, it was necessary to insure the possession of the sceptre; and thus an inviolable secrecy enveloped the principles of the science."—From Egypt, the practice of the occult sciences passed into Greece; and in the arrangement of the various celebrated oracles, and doubtless in the choice of the sites, the Thaumaturgists took the lead. Ventri-olism, probably, gave a tongue to the sacred oaks of Dodona; while at Delphi and Didyma, intoxicating gas may have inspired the priest or priestess who delivered the response.

"It is not correct, however, to assume that, in the delivering of oracles, all was intentional imposture and deceit. Those who uttered them were often under the influence of real delirium. M. de Tiedmann very plausibly believes that the German priestesses, prophesying amidst the din of the tumult of waters, and fixedly regarding the eddies formed on the rapid course of the river, would, in such a position, soon become vertiginous. Something similar may be seen in the cataleptic state into which the magnetizers throw their subjects who are weak in organization, and still more feeble in mind, by disturbing the imagination and fixing attention for a considerable time on a succession of monotonous and absurd gestures. * * * At Didyma, previous to prophesying, the priestess of the oracle of Branchides inhaled for some time the vapour of a sacred fountain. The oracle of the Colophoniens, at Claros, was delivered by a priest who prepared himself by drinking the water of a basin inclosed in the grotto of Apollo. This beverage is said to have shortened his days."

The Delphic exhalation has been generally supposed to have been carbonic acid gas.—Dr. Thompson is of opinion that "it was sulphurous acid, as it caused almost frantic delirium."

Fumes of tobacco intoxicated the Mexican priests, when they uttered their responses; and the Scandinavian prophetesses, as the reader may remember, previously to pouring forth "the Runic rhyme," were accustomed to drink a potion which threw them into a trance-like slumber.

The habits of observation and inquiry which the priests exercised, of course rendered them familiar with many a natural indication or prognostic which escaped the

observation of the vulgar. Thus, we find them predicting coming events in a manner that must have appeared absolutely miraculous to their hearers. "The science of the aruspices and augurs was, also, founded on the observations appertaining to physics, to meteorology, or to natural history." Possessed of extensive power conferred upon him by his superior knowledge, it became of importance to the Thaumaturgist to conceal that knowledge from the vulgar; and, to this end, the most effectual agent was, as Michaelis remarks, a universal language, invented by the learned and devoted exclusively to their use:—

"Almost all nations have possessed some species of sacred writings, not more intelligible to the vulgar than the hieroglyphics of Egypt.

The Roman pontiffs, in their rites, made use of names and words known to themselves alone; the few we are acquainted with relate only to ceremonials; those having reference to real science have been too carefully concealed to reach us. * * * In Egypt, and probably also in the temples of other countries, these mysteries were concealed under a second envelope,—namely, the language in which the invocations were couched.

Chæremon gave instructions how to command the geni, in the name of him who sitteth on the Lotus—borne in a vessel, or who appears different in each of the signs of the Zodiac. These marks unequivocally distinguish Osiris, the Sun-God. Emanating from an astronomical religion, the sacred formulas transferred the language of Astronomy to magical operations. We shall prove that the sorcery and magic of the moderns were in a great measure composed of the relics of the Occult Science formerly preserved in the temples. We can trace in it that confusion of language, so much the more striking, that nothing could give rise to it at an epoch distant from the reign of astronomical religion; so that we are authorized to affirm that it is referable to a period when its expressions were comprehended, its origin known revered."

A natural consequence of the employment of allegorical signs was an erroneous interpretation of them by the uninitiated. This, while it increased the mystery, also increased the difficulty of discovery. Had M. Salverte proceeded with his inquiries so far as the period of the middle ages, he might have illustrated this part of his subject by most curious extracts from the writings of the alchemists. The unintelligible sentence or uncomprehended allegory became useless, in its proper sense, to those unacquainted with the key of the mystery; but still, the remembrance of the power supposed to reside therein remained; and thus, "even when meaning was no longer attached to the terms mysteriously recited, or those graven on stones or written on parchment, perhaps a greater reverence was conceded to them, because their origin—and the measure of their real virtue—were not suspected." Thus, "the Hindoos affirm that each letter is governed by an angel, an emanation of the virtue of God's omnipotence; and these angels are represented by the letters which compose the oration, or form of incantation, by which miracles are to be wrought." This opinion is, however, common to all the eastern nations; and most of the marvels of the Cabala were believed to be wrought by the wonderful working word. Among the inhabitants of modern Europe this superstition still lingers; and gibberish is an important element in the calling at once of the quack and of the conjurer. "Abracadabra"—that magic word, believed to charm away agues,—will really, according to Dr. Thompson, "such is the adequate to effect a cure."

It has been supposed, with great plausibility, that several barbarous words, used in witchcraft and conjuration, have been corruptions of those Latin and Greek words which originally belonged to mere primitive tongues;—and in like manner have many rites been derived from the earliest antiquity—according to our author, even the Witches' Sabbath:—

"To transport themselves to the Sabbath, or rather to dream that they were transported there, the sorcerers rubbed their bodies with a sort of pomade; the secret of composing which, a secret which so often was fatal to them, is the last, perhaps the only one, which they have preserved. A sudden, deep, and continued sleep, sad and mournful visions, sometimes mixed with voluptuous movements, were generally produced by the magical unction, the effect of which was to combine the two most powerful feelings of the human soul—pleasure and terror. The choice of the efficacious substances of which the pomade was composed, the discovery of their virtues, and the manner of employing them, cannot be attributed to the modern sorcerers, who are always found in the lowest and most ignorant classes; this knowledge has doubtless descended from a much higher source."

The worship of the cat and of the goat was among the charges brought against the Templars; and in the 16th and 17th centuries, we have abundant proofs, in the trials for witchcraft, of the prominent station assigned to these animals by superstition. Now, the cat, as well as the goat, was ranked among the sacred animals of the Egyptians; and the former was considered sacred to Isis,—whose worship, under the title of the Ephesian Diana, passed into Asia Minor. It may appear strange that the old crone, in Christian times, should connect with her cat notions of mysterious agency; but it is not more strange than that the cunning woman, even in the present days, should cast the grounds of her tea-cup, and from their appearance pretend to prognosticate good or evil luck. The very use which she makes, to-day, of the sediment of her tea, was, more than three thousand years ago, derived, by the Egyptian priests, from the muddy waters of the Nile; and the mode of divination, prescribed most probably by the sacred books, and performed with all the imposing splendour of Egyptian worship, to determine the fate of kingdoms,—has, in the long lapse of so many centuries,

become the mere conjuring trick in the farmer's kitchen, to foretell the success of the cricket match or of the ploughman's courtship.

In his eleventh chapter, M. Salverte begins the enumeration of the various wonders employed by the Thaumaturgists, commencing with mechanical contrivances. "The science of constructing wonderful machines was carried to a point of perfection that has never been attained in modern times," says the author; and he refers to the difficulties which the French mechanics encountered, "in striving to place on a pedestal one of these monoliths that the Egyptians, forty centuries ago, erected in such numbers before their sacred edifices." The Temple at Eleusis seems to have been supplied with a moveable floor:—

"English travellers who, visited the remains of the temple of Ceres, at Eleusis, observed that the pavement of the sanctuary is rough and unpolished, and much lower than that of the adjacent portion. It is, therefore, probable that a wooden floor, on a level with the portico, covered the present floor, and concealed a vault destined to admit of the action of machinery beneath the sanctuary for moving the floor. In the soil of an interior vestibule, they observed two deeply indented grooves, or ruts; and as no carriage could possibly be drawn into this place, the travellers conjectured that these were grooves intended to receive the pulleys which served in the mysteries to raise a heavy body; 'perhaps,' say they, 'a moving floor.' In confirmation of their opinion, they perceived further on other grooves, which might have served for the counter-balances to raise the floor."

Mechanical contrivances seen also to have been used at the entrance of the cave of Trophonius. The knowledge of the ancients in acoustics was greater than has been generally supposed; and the marvellous heads that have spoken—from that at Lesbos, which foretold the death of Cyrus, down to that of Albertus Magnus—may correctly be assigned to the same power which, some years since, astonished all London, in the name of the Invisible Girl. In optics, the success of the Thaumaturgists was great; and the aid of the "magical mirror" was often invoked:—

"The luxurious gardens, the magnificent palaces, which in the initiations suddenly appeared, from the depths of obscurity, brilliantly illuminated by magic light, or, as it were, by a sun of their own, are reproduced for us in the justly admired modern invention of the Diorama. The principal artifice lies in the manner of throwing light upon the objects, while the spectator is kept in darkness. This was not difficult, as the initiated hurried from one subterranean apartment to another, and being now elevated in the air, and again suddenly precipitated, he might easily imagine himself to be still in the bowels of the earth, from the obscurity of the place that enclosed him, although on the level of the ground."

Apparitions, says the author, though the most common of the miracles founded on optics, have yet obtained the greatest celebrity in the third century, Lactantius represents the magicians as always prepared to convince the sceptical by apparitions of the dead and even so lately as

"the ninth century, the Emperor Basil, the Macedonian, inconsolable for the death of his son, had recourse to the prayers of a Pontiff already celebrated for the power of working apparent miracles. An image of this dear son, magnificently apparelled and mounted on a superb horse, was made to appear before him; but, the spectral son advancing towards him disappeared, in the act of rushing into his father's arms. To explain this historical extract, it is requisite to admit the improbable supposition, that a horseman was appointed to play the part of the young Prince, as the resemblance must have been perfect; and would not the father have seized, held and folded him in his embrace? And would not the false nature of the apparition have been discovered and denounced, by the enemies of the Thaumaturgists, on the knowledge of the existence of the man; and would not the remarkable resemblance, which made him of use on this occasion, have afterwards discovered him?"

Dr. Brewster, however, has explained this apparition to have been reflecting the image of two concave mirrors the image of a picture of the Emperor's son. "As the picture was approached towards the first mirror, the image appeared to advance into the father's arms; when it was withdrawn, it, of course, eluded his grasp."

The influence of the Thaumaturgists over animals was unquestionably extraordinary. M. Salverte thinks that, in many instances, this might be traced to the great care and kindness bestowed on them. It has been said, that the celebrated learned pig was brought up as much as possible like a dog; and that the attachment which he displayed to his master was really dog-like. Scents were sometimes used as a temporary influence,—and are still. It is mentioned by Mrs. Lee, that a young half-tamed leopard fawned upon and attempted to follow her, one day, on her approaching him with a handkerchief scented with lavender, in her hand. The effect of scents and peculiar food on animals, especially the serpent tribe, leads M. Salverte, in the second volume, to contemplate the power possessed by the Thaumaturgists in producing and modifying soporific or incantating drinks. All aspirants to initiation, and those who came to request prophetic dreams of the gods, were prepared, not only by fasts, and then by meals expressly provided for them, but also, and lastly, by mysterious drinks, which were mostly offered as the produce of some fountain. Before visiting the cave of Trophonius, the water of Mnemosyne was administered:—

"Plutarch has preserved to us a description of the mysteries of Trophonius, related by a man who had passed two nights and a day in the grotto. They appear to be rather the dreams of a person intoxicated by a powerful narcotic than a description of a real spectacle. Timarchus, the dame of the ini-

tiate, experienced a violent head-ache, when the apparitions commenced; that is to say, when the drugs began to affect his senses, and when the apparitions vanished and he awoke from this delirious slumber, the same pain was keenly felt. Timarchus died three months after his visit to the grotto; the priests, no doubt, having made use of very powerful drugs. It is said that those who had once consulted the oracle acquired a melancholy which lasted all their lives, the natural consequence, no doubt, of the serious shock to their health from the potions administered to them."

Of magical formulae, fumigations, as the reader will remember, were among the most important. The chafing-dish and the perfume always accompany the magic of the East—even in the present day; and such was the case from the earliest period.

Magical ointments appear not to have been entirely false:—

"It cannot be disputed that the customary and frequent anointing, which formed part of the ancient ceremonies, must have offered opportunities, and giving facility for turning this knowledge to advantage. Before consulting the oracle of Trophonius, the body was rubbed with oil; this preparation undoubtedly concurred in producing the desired vision. Before being admitted to the mysteries of the Indian sages, Apollonius and his companions were anointed with an oil, the strength of which made them imagine that they were bathed with fire."

The chapter which follows, on the 'Influence of the Imagination seconded by Physical Accessories,' is chiefly devoted to the relation of well-known stories—such as the appearance of Caesar to Brutus, the dream of the Emperor Julian, wraths of the Highlanders, and the spectre of the Broken.—Then come remarks on the ecstatic state produced by the imagination dwelling on one subject, or being strongly excited by the actions of others. Under this head, the dancing mania, and similar instances of over-excited fancy, are given—as well as animal magnetism, which M. Salverte treats with but little respect.

The Thaumaturgists pretended to raise the dead—an easy trick; and were adept in the art of poisoning, which gave them sure means for foretelling death. Their accurate meteorological observations, doubtless, enabled them at times to foretell storms, and even earthquakes; and M. Salverte even conjectures that they were acquainted with the method of drawing the lightning from heaven. The naphtha springs, too, furnished them with means of working numerous marvels. Phosphorus appears to have been known to them; and M. Salverte considers that to have been the agent employed on the poisoned shirt sent by Dejanira to Hercules.

Notices of the Greek fire,—of a composition resembling gunpowder,—and of the employment of the magnet, which M. Salverte thinks was known in the East many ages before Europe received it—follow; and in conclusion the author remarks, that although the first Thaumaturgists cannot be accused of imposture; a conclusion scarcely borne out we think, by the facts,—still "it would be as ridiculous as impossible would have been a more philosophic conclusion. In an appendix M. Salverte subjoins a long dissertation upon dragons, and another on the musical sounds produced by the statue of Meunon. Both are very desultory:—and this, indeed, is the general character of the volumes before us. The notes of Dr. Thomson form a valuable addition to the work; but we wish that, instead of editing, he had entirely re-written it; or, better still, produced a work of his own on the subject.

Beware of Impatience.—There's many a pleasure in life which we might possess, were it not for our impatience. Young people, especially, miss a great deal of happiness because they cannot wait till the proper time. A man once gave a fine pear to a little boy, saying to him, "The pear is green now, my boy; but lay it by for a week, and it will then be ripe, and very delicious." "But," said the child, "I want to eat it now father." "I tell you it is not ripe yet," said the father, "it will not taste good, and besides, it will make you sick." No, it won't father; I know it won't, it looks so good.—Do let me eat it?

After a little more teasing the father consented, and the child ate the pear. The consequence was, that the next day he was taken sick, and came very near dying. Now all this happened because the child was impatient. He could not wait, and accordingly the pear that might have been very pleasant and harmless, was the occasion of severe illness. Thus it is that impatience, in a thousand instances, leads children, and pretty ones too, to convert sources of happiness into actual mischief and misery.

There were some boys once who lived near a pond; and when winter came, they were very anxious to have it freeze over, so that they could slide and skate upon the ice. At last there came a very cold night, and in the morning the boys went to the pond to see if the ice would bear them. Their father came by at the moment, and seeing that it was not safe yet, and advised them to wait another day before they ventured upon it. But the boys were in a great hurry to enjoy the pleasure of sliding and skating. So they walked out upon it, but pretty soon they began to crack—crack—crack—and down they were all plunged into the water. It was not very deep, so they got out, though they were very wet, and came near drowning; and all because they could not wait.

Now these things, though they may seem to be trifles, are full of instruction. They teach us to beware of impatience, to wait till the fruit is ripe, they teach us that the cup of pleasure, seized before the proper time, is turned to poison. They show us the importance of patience.

A good temper, a good library, a good wife, and a good friend, are four of the choicest blessings of human life.