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Edited by Anthony Todd Thomson

Excerpt

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THE PHILOSOPHY
OF
MAGIC, PRODIGIES,
AND
APPARENT MIRACLES.

CHAPTER I.

Preparations of drugs and beverages; some soporific, others for producing temporary imbecility. Circé; Nepenthes. Delightful illusions; fearful illusions; involuntary revelations; invincible courage, produced by meats and potions.—The Old Man of the Mountains deceived his disciples by illusions: he probably fortified them against torture by stupifying drugs. The use of them becomes habitual, and conduces to bodily insensibility and imbecility.

TRIUMPHANT over the obstacles which debarred him from attaining perfection, the initiated beheld all the hidden treasures of science laid open to him. It was no difficult task for him to unravel the secret of the wonders that, in the scenes of his first reception, penetrated him with religious admiration: but destined, thenceforth, to lay open to the profane the path of light, it was time he should learn to what operations he himself had been submitted; how his whole moral being had been subjected to their influences, and how he must employ the same means that had been used in his initiation, in order to

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obtain dominion over the minds of those who might aim at attaining to the same point at which he had arrived, and by what means he should display himself all powerful by his works, before those who were not permitted to participate in the divine dignity of the priesthood.

The aspirants to initiation, and those who came to request prophetic dreams of the Gods, were prepared by a fast, more or less prolonged, after which they partook of meals expressly prepared; and also of mysterious drinks, such as the water of *Lethe*,* and the water of *Mnemosyne* in the grotto of Trophonius; or of the *Ciceion* in the mysteries of the Eleusinia. Different drugs were easily mixed up with the meats, or, introduced into the drinks, according to the state of mind or body into which it was necessary to throw the recipient, and the nature of the visions he was desirous of procuring.

We know what accusations had been raised against some of the early sects of christianity, charges which were unjustly reflected upon all christian assemblies. They would scarcely be considered as unfounded, had many heresiarchs adopted the criminal practices imputed by popular rumour to the high-priests of the Markesians.†

* The river which yielded the water of Lethe, and the fountain Mnemosyne, were both near the Trophonian grotto, which was in Beotia. The waters of both were drunk by whoever consulted the oracle; the Lethian draught was intended to make him forget all his former thoughts; the Mnemosynian to strengthen his memory, that he might remember the visions which he was about to see in the grotto. The latter seemed essential, as the consulter was obliged, after emerging from the grotto, and recovering from his alarm, to write down his vision on a small tablet which was preserved in the temple.—ED.

† The Markesians were a sect named from their chief, the

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It is said that in their religious ceremonies aphrodisaic beverages were administered to women. Without judging in this particular case, we believe that powerful aphrodisiacs* were occasionally used in the mysterious orgies of polytheism; and it is only by admitting such a supposition, that we can explain the monstrous debaucheries to which the votaries of Bacchus gave themselves up in the Bacchanalian festivals, denounced and punished at Rome, in the year 186, before Christ. A scene in a romance by Petronius† shows that they were used much later in the nocturnal reunions where superstitious rites were employed as a veil and an excuse for the excesses of libertinism. But such an expedient was extremely limited in its power; it disordered the senses; yet it did not act on the imagination, though it delivered up the physical man to the power of the guilty Thaumaturgist; it did not destroy the moral faculty. The substances destined to produce, in secret ceremonies, the most important effects, were the simplest and most common opiates. We may heresiarch Mark, who was guilty of so many superstitions and impostures. Among others, St. Irenæus informs us, that in consecrating chalices filled with water and wine, according to the Christian rite, he filled the chalices with a certain red liquor which he called blood. He also permitted women to consecrate the holy mysteries.—Butler's *Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, &c.* vol. v. chap. xxviii.

* S. Epiphanius, *contr. Haereses*. lib. i. tome iii. *contr. Marcianos*. Haeres. 24.

† Arbiter Petronius is supposed to have been a fictitious name bestowed upon the romance alluded to in the text; whilst others assert that the romance was the production of Caius Petronius, a favourite of Nero, and a minister to his vicious pleasures. The work is a picture of the profligate manners of the period it describes, totally unfit for general perusal.—Ed.

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readily conceive of what service they were to the Thaumaturgist; whether intended to close eyes too observing, and too quick to scrutinize the causes of the apparent miracles; or to produce the alternatives of an unconquerable sleep, and a sudden awakening; effects well adapted to persuade the man who experiences them, that a supernatural power is sporting with his existence, and changing at his pleasure every circumstance that troubles or that amuses it. Their methods were various; a collection that we possess, and from which we shall quote, furnishes us with two examples. In one case we are informed that a young Prince was sent to sleep every evening by the juice of a plant, and every morning recovered from his torpor by the scent of a perfume.* Again—a sponge steeped in vinegar, and passed under the nose of Aben Hassan, provoked sneezing and a slight vomiting, which suddenly destroyed the effects of the soporific powder which rendered him insensible. In another instance, the same symptoms and results were produced, when a young Princess, who had been sent into a deep sleep by a narcotic, was exposed to the open air.†

In a spot, far removed from the scenes of the thousand and one nights, we find the employment of a similar secret. Among the Nadoessis ‡ in South America, there existed a religious society of men devoted to the Great Spirit. Carver witnessed the admission of a new member into it. The priests threw into the mouth of the candidate something that resembled a bean:

* *The Arabian Nights*, xxvith Night. tome 1. p. 221.

† *The Arabian Nights*, cxcvth Night. vol. iv. p. 97—149.

‡ Carver. *Travels in South America*. p. 200—201.

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almost immediately he fell down, immoveable, insensible, and apparently dead. They gave him violent blows on the back, but these did not restore sensibility; nor, for some minutes, bring him as it were to life again. When he did revive, he was agitated with convulsions, that did not cease until he had thrown up what they had made him swallow.*

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 the description of a real spectacle. Timarches, the name of the initiate, 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 as keenly felt. Timarches 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.

The consulters of the oracle, were, I believe, carried

* It is probable that the seed employed was the fruit of a species of *Strychnos*, the effect of which is to produce paralysis, with convulsions. That it did not cause death might depend on the entire seed having been swallowed; its influence in that state being considerably less than if it had been administered in powder.—ED.

† Plutarch. *De Dæmonio Socratis*.

‡ Suidas . . . Clavier, *Mémoire sur les Oracles*, etc. p. 159—160.

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to the gate of the grotto, when their forced sleep began to be dissipated. The visions that occupied this slumber most probably formed (as has been also suspected by Clavier*) all the incidents of the miraculous spectacle they believed to have been exhibited by the Gods. On awakening also after having been presented with a drink, probably intended to restore entirely the use of their senses, they were ordered to relate every thing they had seen and heard; the priest requiring to know what they had dreamed.

Powerful soporifics often possess the property of deranging the intellect: the berries of the Belladonna† when eaten produce furious madness, followed by a sleep that lasts twenty-four hours. Still more frequently than bodily sleep, the sleep of the soul, temporary imbecility, delivers up man to the power of those who could reduce him to this humiliating state. The juice of the Datura‡ seed is employed by the Portuguese women of Goa: they

* Clavier. *Mémoire sur les Oracles*, &c. p. 158—159.

† *Atropa Belladonna*, Deadly Nightshade, has fruit resembling a black cherry, seated within a large, green, persistent flower-cup or calyx. The fruit is of a deep black-purple colour, and contains many seeds, enveloped in a sweetish juice. Every part of the plant is poisonous, and when eaten causes symptoms resembling those of intoxication, with fits of laughter and violent gesticulations, followed by dilatation of the pupils of the eyes, delirium, and death. Buchanan, the Scottish historian, states that the victory of Macbeth over the Danes was obtained chiefly by mixing the juice of this plant with wine, which was sent as a donation from the Scots to Sweno during a truce. He adds, “vis fructui, radici, æ maxime semini somnifera, et quæ in amentium, si largius sumantur, agat.” —*Rerum Scot. Hist.* lib. VIII. § VI.—ED.

‡ *Datura ferox*, in doses sufficiently large to affect the brain, causes indistinctness of vision, with a disposition to restless

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mix it, says Linschott,* in the liquor drank by their husbands, who fall, for twenty-four hours at least, into a stupor accompanied by continued laughing ; but so deep is the sleep, that nothing passing before them affects them ; and when they recover their senses, they have no recollection of what has taken place. The men, says Pyrrard,† make use of the same secret in order to submit to their desires women who would consent by no other means. Francis Martin,‡ after having detailed all the injurious effects of the *Daturas*, adds, that the delirium may be arrested by placing the feet of the patient in hot water : the remedy causes vomiting, a circumstance which reminds us of the manner in which the sleeper and the young Princess in the Arabian Nights, and the initiated Nadoëssis, were delivered from their stupor.

A secret so effectual having fallen into the hands of the ignorant, must, there is reason to believe, have belonged to

sleep, accompanied with delirium, in which the most ridiculous actions and absurd positions are exhibited. All the *Daturas*, namely, *fastuosa* ; *Metel* : *Tatula* ; and even *Stramonium*, which is employed as a medicine in this country, possess nearly similar poisonous properties. The species *Metel* and *Tatula* are employed in the East Indies to cause intoxication for licentious and criminal purposes.—ED.

* Linschott. *Narrative of a Voyage to the East Indies, with the notes of Paludanus*. 3rd edition, folio. pp. 63, 64, 111. The Thorn Apple, *Stramonium*, a plant of the same family as the *Datura*, produces similar effects ; it has sometimes been criminally employed in Europe.

† *Voyage of Francis Pyrrard*. (2 vols. in-4°. Paris 1679). tome II. p. 68—69.

‡ Francis Martin. *Description of the first Voyage made by the French to the East Indies*. p. 163—164.

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the Thaumaturgists to whom it was much more important. Among the aborigines of Virginia, the aspirant to the priesthood was made to drink, during the course of his painful initiation, a liquor* which threw him into a state of imbecility. If, as we may suppose, the object of this practise was to render him docile, we may believe also, that the custom did not commence in the New World.† Magicians have, in all ages, made use of similar secrets.

The Oriental tales frequently present to us stories of powerful magicians changing men into animals. Varro, quoted by St. Augustine,‡ relates that the magicians of Italy, attracting near them the unsuspecting traveller, administered to him, in cheese, a drug which changed him into a beast of burthen. They loaded him then with their baggage, and at the end of the journey restored him to his own form. Under these figurative expressions, quoted from Varro, who probably quoted from some prior work, we perceive that the traveller being intoxicated by the drug he had taken, blindly submitted himself to this singular degradation until the magician released him by giving him an appropriate antidote. This tradition has no doubt the same origin as that of Circé.§

* This liquor was procured by decoction from certain roots called *Vissocan*; and the initiation was termed *Husea nawar*.

† In consulting most of the Grecian oracles, it was the custom either for the officiating priest, or the consulting person, to drink of some secret well, the water of which most probably contained some narcotic infusion.—ED.

‡ S. August. *De civit. Dei*. lib. xviii. cap. xvii. xviii.

§ This does not contradict the assertion of Solinus, that Circé

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Wearied by the amorous pursuit of Calchus, King of the Daunians, Circé, if we may believe Parthenius, invited him to a banquet, in all the viands of which she had infused narcotic drugs. Hardly had he eaten of them, when he fell into such imbecility that Circé shut him up with the swine. She afterwards cured him, and restored him to the Daunians, binding them, however, by a vow, never to allow him to return to the island she inhabited.

The cup of Circé, says Homer, contained a poison that transformed men into beasts; implying that, when plunged by it into a state of stupid inebriety, they believed themselves reduced to this shameful degradation. This explanation, the only one admissible, agrees with the relation of Parthenius. In spite of the decision of some commentators, I venture to affirm, that the poet did not intend this narration as an allegorical lesson against voluptuousness. Such an explanation would not accord with the rest of the narrative, which terminates by the wise Ulysses throwing himself into the arms of the enchantress, who kept him there a whole year. In many other passages, also, of his poems, Homer has noticed purely physical facts. This is so true that he mentions a natural preservative against the effect of poison; a root which he describes with that minuteness, which, better than any other poet, he knew how to unite with the brilliancy of poetry and the elegance of versification.

Neither can we take, in a figurative sense, the account deceived the eyes by phantasmagorical illusions. She might make use of these to strengthen the established belief, that the drugs which rendered men imbecile, metamorphosed them into beasts.

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given by the prince of poets, respecting the *Nepenthes* which, bestowed by Helen on Telemachus, had the effect of suspending all feelings of grief in the heart of the hero.* Whatever might have been the substance thus designated, it is certain that in Homer's time, there was a belief in the existence of certain liquors, which were not less stupifying than wine, and more efficacious than the juice of the grape, in dif-

* Many opinions have been advanced respecting *Nepenthes*; but the most probable is, that which refers it to the hemp, *Caunabis sativa*, from which the Hindoos make their bang, which is narcotic, and produces delightful dreams.

The native plant, after it has flowered, is dried, and sold in the bazaars of Calcutta for smoking, under the name *Ganjah*. The large leaves and capsules employed also for smoking, are called *Bang* or *Subjee*. In both of these forms the smoking of the Hemp causes a species of intoxication of a most agreeable description, and consequently the plant has acquired many epithets, which may be translated "assuager of sorrow," "increaser of pleasure," "cement of friendship," "laughter-mover;" and several others of the same description.

In Nepal, the resin only is used, under the name of *Churrus*. It is collected in some places by naked coolies walking through the fields of hemp at the time when the plant exudes the resin, which sticks to their skin, from which it is scraped off, and kneaded into balls. In whatever manner it is collected, when it is taken in doses of from a grain to two grains, it causes not only the most delightful delirium; but, when repeated, it is followed by catalepsy, or that condition of insensibility to all external impressions which enables the body to be, as it were, moulded into any position, like a Dutch jointed doll, in which the limbs remain in the position in which they are placed, however contrary to the natural influence of gravity; and this state will continue for many hours. Such an instrument could not fail to prove a most powerful agent in working apparent miracles in the hands of a Thaumaturgist.—ED.