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978-1-108-04440-0 - The Book of Wonderful Characters: Memoirs and Anecdotes of Remarkable and Eccentric Persons in All Ages and Countries

Henry Wilson and James Caulfield

Excerpt

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WONDERFUL CHARACTERS.

Francis Battalia,

The Stone-Eater.

IN 1641 Hollar etched a print of Francis Battalia, an Italian, who is said to have eaten half a peck of stones a day. Respecting this individual, Dr. Bulwer, in his *Artificial Changing*, relates that he saw him in London when he was about thirty years of age; that he was born with two stones in one hand, and one in the other. As soon as he was born, having the breast offered him, he refused to suck, and when they would have fed him with pap, he utterly rejected that also. Whereupon the midwife and nurse entering into consideration of the strangeness of his birth and refusal of all kind of nourishment, consulted with some physicians what they should do in this case. They, when they saw the infant reject all that they could contrive for nourishment, told the women they thought that the child brought its meat with it into the world, and that it was to be nourished with stones; whereupon they desired the nurse to give him one stone in a little drink, which he very readily took into his mouth and swallowed down. When he had swallowed all the three stones, and began to want his hard-meat, the physicians advised the nurse to get some small pebbles, as like those which he was born with as they could, with which kind of nourishment he was brought up, and on which he continued to subsist in manhood. Dr. Bulwer thus describes his manner of feeding:—"His manner is to put three

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or four stones into a spoon, and so putting them into his mouth together, he swallows them all down one after another ; then (first spitting) he drinks a glass of beer after them. He devours about half a peck of these stones every day, and when he chinks upon his stomach, or shakes his body, you may hear the stones rattle as if they were in a sack, all which in twenty-four hours are resolved. Once in three weeks he voids a great quantity of sand, after which he has a fresh appetite for these stones, as we have for our victuals, and by these, with a cup of beer, and a pipe of tobacco, he has his whole subsistence. He has attempted to eat meat and bread, broth and milk, and such kind of food, upon which other mortals commonly live ; but he could never brook any, neither would they stay with him to do him any good. He is a black, swartish little fellow, active and strong enough, and has been a soldier in Ireland, where he made great use of this property ; for, having the advantage of this strange way of alimony, he sold his allowance of food sometimes at high rates. At Limerick he sold a sixpenny loaf and twopenny worth of cheese for twelve shillings and sixpence. It seems the fellow when he first came out was suspected to be an impostor, and was, by command of the State, shut up for a month, with the allowance of two pots of beer and half an ounce of tobacco every day, but was afterwards acquitted from all suspicion and deceit."

There are other remarkable cases of stone-eating on record. Platerus speaks of a beggar-boy, who for four farthings would suddenly swallow many stones which he met with by chance in any place, though they were as big as a walnut, so filling his belly that by the collision of them while they were pressed, the sound was distinctly heard. Father Paulian says that a true lithophagus, or stone-eater, was brought to Avignon in the beginning of May, 1760. He not only swallowed flints an inch and a half long, a full inch broad, and half an inch thick, but such stones as he could reduce to powder, such as marble, pebbles, &c., he made up into paste, which was to him a most agreeable and wholesome food. Father Paulian examined this man with all the attention he possibly could, and found his

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THE STONE-EATER.

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gullet very large, his teeth exceedingly strong, his saliva very corrosive, and his stomach lower than ordinary.

This stone-eater was found on Good Friday, in 1757, in a northern inhabited island, by some of the crew of a Dutch ship. He was made by his keeper to eat raw flesh with his stones; but could never be got to swallow bread. He would drink water, wine, and brandy, which last liquor gave him infinite pleasure. He slept at least twelve hours in a day, sitting on the ground with one knee over the other, and his chin resting on his right knee. He smoked almost all the time he was not asleep, or not eating. Some physicians at Paris got him blooded; the blood had little or no serum, and in two hours' time became as fragile as coral.

He was unable to pronounce more than a few words, such as *Oui, Non, Caillou, Bon*. "He has been taught," adds the pious Father, evidently pleased with the docility of his interesting pupil, "to make the sign of the cross, and was baptised some months ago in the Church of St. Côme, at Paris. *The respect he shows to ecclesiastics, and his ready disposition to please them, afforded me the opportunity of satisfying myself as to all these particulars; and I am fully convinced that he is no cheat.*"

In 1788, a stone-eater exhibited his wonderful powers of eating and swallowing stones at 404, Strand. The following is a facsimile of his advertisement:—

"An Extraordinary Stone-Eater.

—

"The Original

"STONE-EATER,

"The Only One in the World,

is arrived, and means to perform this, and every day (Sunday excepted), at Mr. Hatch's, Trunk Maker, 404, Strand, opposite Adelphi.

—

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FRANCIS BATTALIA,

“STONE-EATING

“and

“STONE-SWALLOWING,

“and after the Stones are swallowed, may

“be heard to clink in

“his Belly, the same as in a Pocket.

“The present is allowed to be the age of Wonders and Improvements in the Arts. The idea of a Man’s flying in the Air, twenty years ago, before the discovery of the Use of Balloons, would have been laughed at by the most credulous! Nor does the History of Nature afford so extraordinary a Relation as that of a Man’s EATING and subsisting on PEBBLE FLINTS, TOBACCO PIPES, and Mineral Excrescences: but so it is, and the Ladies and Gentlemen of this Metropolis and its vicinity have now an opportunity of witnessing this extraordinary Fact by seeing the most Wonderful Phenomenon of the Age, who GRINDS and SWALLOWS STONES, &c., with as much ease as a Person would crack a nut, and masticate the kernel.

“This Extraordinary Stone-Eater appears not to suffer the least Inconvenience from so ponderous, and to all other persons in the World, so indigestible a Meal, which he repeats from twelve at noon till seven.

. “Any Lady or Gentleman may bring Black Flints or Pebbles with them.

“N.B.—His Merit is fully demonstrated by Dr. Munro, in his *Medical Commentary*, 1772, and several other Gentlemen of the Faculty. Likewise Dr. John Hunter and Sir Joseph Banks can witness the Surprising Performance of this most Extraordinary STONE-EATER.

“Admittance—Two Shillings and Sixpence.

..* “A Private Performance for Five Guineas, on a short notice.”

A Spanish Stone-Eater was exhibited at the Richmond Theatre, August 2, 1790.

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THE STONE-EATER.

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Still more recently a Stone-Eater invited the Public to witness the display of his feats by means of the following hand-bill :—

“STONE-EATER.

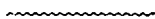
“The Public are most respectfully informed that the above Curious and Wonderful Phenomenon, who was announced for Monday, the Tenth of March, at No. 28, Haymarket, will commence his Extraordinary Exhibition on Monday next, the 17th Instant, at the Great Room, late Globe Tavern, corner of Craven Street, Strand.

“To be seen every Day, from Eleven in the Morning till Five o'clock in the Afternoon.

“Admittance—Half-a-Crown.

“N.B.—Such persons as please may bring Stones with them.

* * * “The Stone-Eater begs to inform those Ladies and Gentlemen who have expressed a desire to see him, that he shall be happy to gratify their curiosity, when he is not publicly engaged.”



Fire and Poison Eaters, &c.

IT seems at first sight difficult to account for the strange phenomenon of a human and perishable creature eating red-hot coals, taken indiscriminately out of a large fire ; broiling steaks upon his tongue ; swallowing huge draughts of liquid fire as greedily as a country squire does roast beef and strong beer. How can that element which we are told is ultimately to devour all things, be devoured itself, as familiar diet, by a mortal man ?

Sir Henry Wotton, in a letter to one of his correspondents,*

* *Reliquiæ Wottonianæ*, ed. 1685.

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dated June 3rd, 1633, speaks of "a strange thing to be seen in London for a couple of pence, which I know not whether I should call a piece of art or nature. It is an Englishman like some swabber of a ship come from the Indies, where he has learned to eat fire as familiarly as ever I saw any eat cakes, even whole glowing brands, which he will crush with his teeth, and swallow. I believe he hath been hard famished in the Terra de Fuego, on the south of the Magellan strait."

The secret of fire-eating was made public by a servant of the celebrated RICHARDSON, who showed it in France about the year 1667, and was one of the first performers of the kind that ever appeared in Europe. It consists only in rubbing the hands, and thoroughly washing the mouth, lips, tongue, teeth, and other parts that are to touch the fire, with pure spirit of sulphur. This burns and cauterises the epidermis, or upper skin, till it becomes as hard as thick leather, and every time the experiment is tried it becomes still easier than before. The bad effects which the frequent swallowing of red-hot coals, melted sealing-wax, resin, brimstone, and other calcined and inflammable matter, might have had upon his stomach, were prevented by drinking plentifully of warm water and oil, as soon as he left the company, till he had vomited all up again.

John Evelyn records having witnessed the feats of Richardson, in the autumn of 1672, at Leicester House, the residence of Lady Sunderland. "He before us devoured brimstone on glowing coals, chewing and swallowing them; he melted a beer-glass, and eat it quite up; then taking a live coal on his tongue, he put on it a raw oyster. The coal was blown on with bellows till it flamed and sparkled in his mouth, and so remained till the oyster gaped and was quite broiled; then he melted pitch and wax with sulphur, which he drank down as it flamed. I saw it flaming in his mouth a good while. He took up a thick piece of iron, such as laundresses use to put in their smoothing boxes; when it was fiery hot, held it between his teeth, then in his hand, and threw it about like a stone; but this I observed he cared not to hold very long. Then he stood on a small pot, and bending his body, took a

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“ glowing iron with his mouth from between his feet, without touching the pot or ground with his hands, with divers other prodigious feats.”*

Madame de Sévigné, in one of her delightful letters, dated 30th June, 1680, describes a man who waited upon her from Vitré, who dropped into his mouth and upon his hand ten or twelve drops of melted sealing-wax, as if it had been so much cold water, and without the slightest semblance of pain ; nor did his tongue or hand show the least sign of burn or injury whatever. She seems to consider it as a miracle ; but in a half-bantering mood asks what will become of the proofs of innocence, so much depended upon in former ages, from the ordeal by fire ?

One of the amusements of 1718 was the juggling exhibition of a fire-eater, whose name was DE HIGHTREHIGHT,† a native of the valley of Annivi, in Savoy, amongst the Alps that divide Italy from Switzerland. This tremendous person ate burning coals, chewed flaming brimstone, and swallowed it ; licked a red-hot poker ; placed a red-hot heater on his tongue ; kindled coals on his tongue ; suffered them to be blown, and broiled meat on them ; ate melted pitch, brimstone, bees'-wax, sealing-wax, and resin, with a spoon ; and to complete the business, he performed all these marvels five times a-day, at the Duke of Marlborough's Head, in Fleet Street, for the trifling sums of 2s. 6d., 1s. 6d., and 1s. Master Hightreight had the honour of exhibiting before Louis XIV, the Kaiser, the King of Sicily, the Doge of Venice, and an infinite number of princes and nobles—including the Prince of Wales, who had nearly lost this inconceivable pleasure by the envious interposition of the Inquisition at Bologna and in Piedmont, which Holy Office seemed inclined to try *their mode of burning* on his body, leaving to him the care of resisting the flames, and rendering them harmless. He was, however, preserved from the unwelcome ordeal by the interference of the Duchess Royal Regent of Savoy, and the Marquis Bentivoglio.

* Evelyn's Diary, 8th October, 1672. † By some spelt *Heiterkeit*.

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But perhaps the most remarkable of all fire-eaters was the famous ROBERT POWELL, who exhibited in public from the year 1718 to 1780, as may be collected from his advertisements during that period, one of which runs as follows :

“SUM SOLUS.

“Please to observe that there are two different performances the same Evening, will be performed by the famous

“Mr. Powell, Fire-Eater, from London :

who has had the honour to exhibit with universal applause, the most surprising performances that were ever attempted by mankind, before His Royal Highness William late Duke of Cumberland, at Windsor Lodge, May 7, 1752 ; before His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester, at Gloucester House, January 30, 1769 ; before His Royal Highness the present Duke of Cumberland, at Windsor Lodge, September 25, 1769 ; before Sir Hans Sloane and several of the Royal Society, March 4, 1751, who made Mr. Powell a compliment of a purse of gold, and a fine, large silver medal, which the curious may view by applying to him ; and before most of the Nobility and Quality in the Kingdom.

“He intends to sup on the following articles :—

“1.—He eats red-hot coals out of the fire as natural as bread. 2.—He licks with the naked tongue red-hot tobacco pipes, flaming with brimstone. 3.—He takes a large bunch of deal matches, lights them all together; and holds them in his mouth till the flame is extinguished. 4.—He takes a red-hot heater out of the fire, licks it with his naked tongue several times, and carries it round the room between the teeth. 5.—He fills his mouth with red-hot charcoal, and broils a slice of beef or mutton upon his tongue, and any person may blow the fire with a pair of bellows at the same time. 6.—He takes a quantity of resin, pitch, bees'-wax, sealing-wax, brimstone, alum, and lead, melts them together over a chafing dish of

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coals, and eats the same combustibles with a spoon, as if it were a porringer of broth (which he calls his dish of soup), to the great and agreeable surprise of the spectators; with various other extraordinary performances never attempted by any other person of this age, and there is scarce a possibility ever will; so that those who neglect this opportunity of seeing the wonders performed by this artist, will lose the sight of the most amazing exhibition ever done by man.

“The doors to be opened by six, and he sups precisely at seven o’clock, without any notice given by the sound of trumpet.

“If gentry do not choose to come at seven o’clock, no performance.

“Price of admittance to Ladies and Gentlemen, One Shilling. Back Seats for Children and Servants, Six-pence.

“Ladies and children may have a private performance any hour of the day, by giving previous notice.

“N.B.—He displaces teeth or stumps so easily as scarce to be felt. He sells a chymical liquid which discharges inflammation, scalds, and burns, in a short time, and is necessary to be kept in all families. His stay in this place will be but short, not exceeding above two or three nights.

“Good fire to keep the gentry warm.”

“Such is his passion,” says a contemporary writer, “for this terrible element, that if he were to come hungry into your kitchen, while a sirloin was roasting, he would eat up the fire and leave the beef. It is somewhat surprising that the friends of *real merit* have not yet promoted him, living as we do in an age favourable to men of genius. Obligated to wander from place to place, instead of indulging himself in private with his favourite dish, he is under the uncomfortable necessity of eating in public, and helping himself from the kitchen fire of some paltry ale-house in the country.”*

* Lounger’s Common Place Book.

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CHAMOUNI was a celebrated Russian salamander ; he was insensible, for a given time, to the effects of heat. He was remarkable for the simplicity and singleness of his character, as well as for that idiosyncrasy in his constitution, which enabled him for so many years, not merely to brave the effects of fire, but to take delight in an element where other men find destruction. He was above all artifice, and would often entreat his visitors to melt their own lead, or boil their own mercury, that they might be perfectly satisfied of the gratification he derived from drinking those preparations. He would also present his tongue, in the most obliging manner, to all who wished, to pour melted lead upon it, and stamp an impression of their seals.

The Paris newspapers of April, 1830, make mention of a man of the name of JEAN PIERRE DECURE, thirty years of age, a native of Africa, who was then at Douai, and who could swallow with impunity all sorts of poisons, arsenic, sulphuric acid, corrosive sublimate, and devour live coals.

Some years ago there was living at Constantinople an extraordinary man, of the name of SOLIMAN, an eater of corrosive sublimate, of the age of 106 years. In his early life he accustomed himself, like other Turks, to the use of opium, but having augmented his dose to a great quantity without experiencing the desired effect, he adopted the use of sublimate, and had taken it for more than thirty years, to the amount of a drachm, or sixty grains, daily. One day he went into the shop of a Jew apothecary, to whom he was unknown, and asked for a drachm of sublimate ; he mixed it in a glass of water, and swallowed it instantly. The apothecary was dreadfully frightened, because he knew the consequences of being accused of poisoning a Turk ; but what was his astonishment when he saw the same man return the next day for another dose of an equal quantity. It is said that Lord Elgin and other Englishmen were acquainted with this extraordinary man, and heard him declare that his enjoyment after having taken this active poison was the greatest he ever felt from any cause whatever.