

## Extracts.

## HISTORIC DOUBTS.

An interesting article in a late number of *Fraser's Magazine* contained a short criticism of Whately's well-known *Historic Doubts*. In exposing the vagaries of the Spiritualists, the writer was naturally led to attack what may be described as an argument in favour of "universal belief." "You have the audacity," says Whately in effect, "to doubt the truth of certain miraculous stories. I will prove that, to be consistent, you must equally doubt the existence of Napoleon; or, if you once admit internal improbability to be a legitimate ground of scepticism, your belief in everything that you do not see with your own eyes and feel with your own hands shall be exhibited as demonstrably absurd." The discomfited sceptic should naturally prefer to swallow any amount of wonders rather than disbelieve in all contemporary history. Nothing can come amiss, rapping tables, the apparition of spirits in crystals, the feats of reading through stone walls and seeing races not yet run, may be taken for gospel on evidence homogeneous with that on which we believe in the existence of Louis Napoleon and Abraham Lincoln. The extreme convenience of this logic to the disciples of the Davenport Brothers is obvious. But the answer made to the writer in *Fraser* is, perhaps, equally obvious. It takes, as he really shows, more evidence to prove that Mr. Home can float about in the air, like a fish in the water, than to prove that Napoleon III. is Emperor of the French. The paradox, indeed, stated broadly, knocks itself on the head. A *reductio ad absurdum* is often a dangerous figure of rhetoric; in trying to make your opponent look silly, you leave out the pith and marrow of his assertions, and you are yours, if landed in the awkward conclusion that a very common-sense argument leads to a manifest absurdity. The process by which Archbishop Whately arrived at his startling conclusions led him by way of certain fallacies of a more delicate nature; his paradoxical assertions shaded gradually into each other so as to conceal the degree of his divergence from an accurate statement of his opponent's creed. In arguing by illustration, we are always liable to drift into topics where the illustration suits our purposes whilst ceasing to correspond to the case put by our adversary.

It need not be said that we all believe in the existence of Napoleon. We could not cut away that part of our creed without reducing the rest of our historical faith to an incoherent jumble. We even believe, with nearly equal confidence, things hanging by a much slighter thread of evidence. We were told one morning that Louis Philippe had been turned out of Paris, and was coming to England under the name of Smith. The story was, in one sense, improbable in the extreme. No one would have guessed, on a particular day in February, 1848, that the King of the French would on that day fortnight be landing at Folkestone, and calling himself Smith. If such a possibility had, by some strange accident, been suggested, the odds against the event would have been incapable of expression in figures. The evidence that it had taken place, was, to most people, slight in the extreme. Some person or persons unknown had told this marvellous story in the papers. Its truth, therefore, rested merely upon the well-known argument that it was in print. We had read it in the papers, and therefore it must be true. It was, however, a mere anonymous assertion of one of the strangest facts that imagination could picture. And yet it never entered into any one's head to doubt its substantial truth; and, if any one had seriously doubted it, his incredulity would have gone far to prove him out of his mind. If we can rest such a stupendous superstructure upon such a feeble groundwork of evidence, why should not a stronger link of evidence enable us to believe a stranger story still? Suppose, for example, that a number of known characters—including Lord Palmerston, Sir Robert Peel, and the late Archbishop of Canterbury—had been upon the pier, and stated on their oaths that His Majesty had crossed the Channel on his cloak, carrying his head under his arm. No one accustomed to reason would have believed their words for a moment. We should have assumed that they were under some strange delusion; that they had just been dining together; that they were indulging in a practical joke. No weight of evidence would induce a belief in a gratuitous miracle, not even alleged (as we, of course, assume) to have any religious significance. If the reasonableness of our disbelief is sufficiently obvious, on what grounds do we justify our ready assent to the truth even of the first story? It looks as if the specific effect of downright assertion in inducing belief were unduly great. We daily believe extraordinary events merely because they are asserted to have happened. America is the native land of playful exaggeration. Many Englishmen say, if they are explicitly asked, that American papers are even fuller of lies than an English county journal in the dead season; yet they never think of doubting that a battle has taken place when Reuter's speaks on the faith of an obscure paper in the Far West. Perhaps they divide the numbers by two; they possibly substitute "defeat" for "strategical movement," or "running away" for "drawing the enemy further from his base;" still they do not doubt that the assertion is substantially true, or that, at any rate, it bears some relation to the truth, involving neither direct contradiction nor pure imagination.

That we are fully justified in granting belief upon these easy

terms follows from the simple fact that further inquiry confirms the first report in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand. Every now and then, indeed, we suffer from a deliberate hoax. In 1848 there came a rumour that a revolution was taking place in Ireland—that railroads were being torn up, barricades erected, and a provisional government proclaimed. As a rule, however, even the most lying of mankind tell more truths than lies. The common mathematical fiction of one A. B. who speaks the truth once in three times shows more talent for imagination than is generally placed to the credit of mathematicians. Such a monster could hardly continue to exist. The supply of truth, like that of cotton, is stimulated by the demand for it. In a rude state of society the virtue of hospitality is universal, because people could not get on without it; but as society takes a more complex form, hospitality recedes in favour of inn-keeping. On the other hand, the habit of telling news with some approach to accuracy becomes common, because our relations to distant countries make it important. "Travellers' tales" is beginning to be a merely traditional expression of distrust. We therefore find it convenient, as a matter of practice, to believe most of what we hear. Perhaps we carry the habit too far. We are seldom, however, taken in by a good specimen of the genuine downright fiction. The best example that we can recollect of late years is that of the railroad tragedy related in the *Times* to have occurred in Georgia. A professed eye-witness recounted, in apparent good faith, a series of deliberate murders which had been perpetrated with the utmost coolness in his presence. The culminating point was the throwing a small boy out of the car, because he complained of his father's murder. There was a boldness of touch about this fiction that almost imposed upon readers. The witness was said to be thoroughly trustworthy. He had no apparent motive for lying. According to Whately's argument we were bound to believe him, unless we would give up belief in general. The evidence was far better than that on which we believe nine stories out of ten. It was not so good as that on which we believe that Muller was hanged, but, until contradicted, it was perhaps better than that on which, before his confession, we believed him to be guilty. Putting aside the presumption raised from its extreme intrinsic improbability, we were as much bound to believe it as we are to believe that Shermans has taken Savannah. As people had not imbibed the logic of *Historic Doubts*, men of sense thought that it was as unfounded as it in fact turned out to be; but the mere habit of believing all that is said induced many persons to give it a hesitating assent.

We are quite right, then, in admitting most stories of the strangest events to be true, although we should be very foolish to refuse to take into account their *a priori* probability or improbability. Our experience of results is a sufficient justification of our habit of assent. But how is this to be reconciled with the logical conditions of the problem? By what process of reasoning does it appear that such improbable events are to be credited on such slight evidence? The answer to this clears up the ingenious fallacy so dexterously immaned in the *Historic Doubts*. In one sense, the improbability of Napoleon's conquest of Russia is enormously great. According to the common illustration, it is improbable that John Smith should meet Thomas Brown at precisely half-past ten o'clock to-morrow exactly at Temple Bar. But the slightest posterior evidence will induce us to believe that this remarkable coincidence has taken place. The fact is, all that we mean by "improbable" in this case is that we may imagine innumerable other combinations in which Smith and Brown would not meet at all, or not meet at that particular time and place. The "improbability" merely means that, if we were in total ignorance of Smith's and Brown's motions, we should never guess beforehand the exact time and place of their meeting. Thus, if a man were to have calculated beforehand all possible configurations of European affairs, he would never have hit upon the special arrangement of a French Emperor at Moscow. But neither would he have hit off, at any other time, the precise scene in course of enactment on the changing theatre of the world. Every succeeding phase of history has this peculiarity, that it is more or less unlike every phase that has preceded it. Every true narrative is therefore an account of something very improbable, in the sense of being incapable of anticipation. History in Europe at least, is a collection of strange stories—meaning, by strange, something without any exact parallel. It is no argument, then, against the truth of a story, to say that it is in this sense strange; the argument becomes valid only when we can say that the divergence from all previous experience is more than the average divergence. This is obviously the case when the story contains a contradiction to some well established theory—such as the commonly received opinions that two and two make four, or that mahogany tables are of strictly limited conversational powers. Downright lies are, so we have remarked, on the whole, in a minority, but that minority certainly includes the larger part of stories marked by indifference to such accepted principles. When, for example, a gentleman relates the celebrated anecdote of his crossing the Atlantic in a washing-tub, the general presumption in favour of the veracity of mankind ceases to operate. His story is one of a large family which are habitually found to involve errors or facts. When a man tells us that a French Emperor has broken loose and conquered half Europe, his assertion belongs to a class seldom put forward with a cautious breath. Whately says that a table has walked up stairs by itself, carrying a moderate lamp with great ease, we recognise in the story a certain likeness to many legends long since dead and buried. It is very hard to be told that we are inconsistent in believing one narrative whilst we refuse to accept the other.

The method by which Whately endeavours to bring out this inconsistency contains the path of his argument. He would have declined, for his own part, to believe a story involving a gratuitous breach of ordinary laws of nature. But, in arguing *ad hominem*, he insists upon the fact that his opponents refuse to believe anything that happens very rare.

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