

BELL'S ECLECTIC JOURNAL.

[Communicated for the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal.]

IN the last number of Dr. Bell's Eclectic Journal, is a notice of an article communicated by me to this Journal of the 20th of September, on the subject of Animal Magnetism. It commences as follows :

"The purport of this essay may be known by the two opening sentences. 'The evidence in favor of Animal Magnetism accumulates on all hands. Events which have lately transpired in a neighboring city leave to ridicule no excuse to amuse herself with facts which reason cannot comprehend.' If reference to the neighboring city means Providence, we will just content ourselves with remarking that the somnambulist lady there has not been able, or has not chosen, to read certain passages, words, or lines, neatly folded several times in paper, and hermetically sealed, which were sent to her from Philadelphia. This were a small matter for so accomplished a personage,' &c.

It then proceeds to comment on the proceedings at Providence as a tissue of base impositions practised on a gullible and gulling public, and ends with promising information which, while it reveals absurdities and imposture, will add to what is really demonstrable in animal magnetism.

If Dr. Bell expects to throw light on the question of animal magnetism by communicating information to the public of such a character as he seems to contemplate, or by following out the course of argument adopted in the last number of his Journal, in an essay on the subject, I shall take the liberty to remark, that he has wholly mistaken the nature and scope of the magnetic phenomena. It is neither by such reasoning, nor by such information, that absurdity is distinguished from imposture, nor additions made to the "demonstrable" knowledge of anything.

Conclusions respecting animal magnetism, to be valid, must be drawn, not from events that do *not* take place, but from events that *do* take place. We need inquire, not what may, or may not, occur again, but what *has* occurred. One positive fact is of more consequence, in connection with those phenomena, than a thousand negative ones. Consequently all the letters that were sent from Philadelphia to Providence, and returned unread, or misconstrued, are little more in point, with reference to this subject, than though they had been unread by the clerks in the post office through which they passed. And all the information of this kind that may be in the possession of Dr. Bell or his friends, is about of the value of ignorance; for evidence of a more substantial character, founded on authority equally good, is already in the possession of the public.

The question of animal magnetism stands thus. A series of facts are asserted by one party; another series of facts are asserted by the other party. Both series are explicable on the supposition that animal magnetism is true. The latter only are explicable on the supposition that it is false. Those who do not believe in it, because they do not understand it, to cut the matter short, deny the first series in toto, and in so doing do not hesitate to stigmatize a large and respectable portion of their fellow citizens, in plain English, as fools or impostors. The

question, then, is reduced to this. Is this denial true, and are those charges just? To this it may be replied that the facts are abundant, tangible, complete, consistent with themselves, and authenticated as far as it is possible for human testimony to confirm anything; that they want nothing short of the capability of being reproduced at will, and that in regard to many of them even this has been done. But animal magnetism has to make its way against the preconceived opinions of mankind. Its professors mingle their theories with the facts they attempt to illustrate, and occasionally, nay frequently, fail in their experiments, and disappoint the inordinate expectations which they have excited in the minds of spectators. These failures, which at least are an argument in favor of their sincerity, for jugglery is uniformly successful, are laid hold of by opposers, made a theme of ridicule, and trumpeted through the public press, to the effect of fortifying old prejudices and withdrawing the attention from the real and intrinsic evidence on which the subject rests. Hence the unfavorable impressions that exist in relation to this matter, at the present time. They do not spring from any defect in the nature and amount of evidence accumulated, but because this evidence is not examined with candor and impartiality, and its weight duly estimated.

Such, in brief, is the true state of the case. The friends of animal magnetism are sanguine and expect it to accomplish great things. Imagination heightens the effect in reality produced, and perhaps the vanity of being thought supernaturally gifted, on the part of the magnetized, leads him to attempt what he cannot accomplish. Their opponents take them at their word, without calling to mind that they know as little as themselves of the subject, and argue most *hypothetically* about the impiety of clothing man with the attributes of omniscience and omnipresence, and the separation of the soul from the body, topics which are as foreign from these phenomena as they are from a fit of convulsions or tetanus. And when they find that constancy wanting in the facts, the unauthorized presumption of which gave a coloring of reason to their absurdities, they discover in it a new reason to consider the whole as a humbug, notwithstanding all analogy teaches that it is just what might be expected, if they belong to a disordered action of the nervous system. The variety and complexity of function the nervous structure is instrumental in performing in its distribution throughout the bodily organs, and the delicacy of experimenting in the almost total absence of principles to guide the experimenter, are lost sight of. A failure is balanced with a successful operation, a wrong guess with a right one, without estimating the difference of probabilities in favor of each; and of course what is proof in everything else, is here nothing but evidence of fraud and wilful deception.

While such is the light in which these facts are contemplated, he cannot expect to be regarded with much favor in the public estimation, who ventures to advocate their authenticity and agreement with the laws of nature. Yet if Dr. Bell, or any other physician, is disposed to think that argument is as well calculated to elucidate the subject as wit, either

original, or borrowed from Rabelais and others, I should have no objection to discuss with him the two following questions.

1st. Whether the leading phenomena of the magnetic sleep do not harmonize with what is known, or regarded as most probable, of the functions of the nervous system.

2d. Whether analogy does not confirm the supposition that this state may be induced by the agency of one individual upon another.

The affirmation of these questions I am prepared to maintain ; and I maintain, also, that ridicule and affected contempt are out of place, and out of time, where and when the negative of them is not established anteriorly. Should Dr. Bell, or any other physician, accept the invitation to discuss these questions, I would have him understand beforehand that I am not responsible for the speculations of the magnetizers. I shall deal with the facts alone—such facts as are admissible on the common principles of evidence—and reserve the right to put my own construction upon them. He will find me no supporter of the transmigration or peregrination of souls from body to body, or from city to city. The explanation I shall give of the facts will be physical purely. Avoiding metaphysics altogether, it will consider these remarkable phenomena as the result of a disturbance in the condition of the nervous expansions and nervous centre, on which external sensation and thought depend.

Boston, Jan. 1, 1838.

BENJAMIN HASKELL, M.D.

BOSTON MEDICAL AND SURGICAL JOURNAL

BOSTON, JANUARY 10, 1838.

AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION.

THIS is by no means the first time we have urged upon the medical men of this country, the necessity of forming a great national medical society, for the advancement of science and good fellowship. Again we call upon our professional brethren to devise some plan for congregating the scientific the ensuing summer, either at Washington or Philadelphia, and if a prospectus were devised and freely circulated, under the sanction of one or two names of gentlemen of Boston, Providence, New Haven, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Richmond, Charleston, Cincinnati, Louisville, &c., there might be convened in the month of August next, an illustrious body of learned men, who would give an impulse to the study of medicine in the United States, of incalculable benefit to the national weal, and certainly to the nation's honor and glory. We contemplate forwarding, ere long, to all our exchange Journals, a scheme for organizing a national association, about which we ask advice and counsel, and if acceptable, also their joint co-operation in the accomplishment of this desirable convocation.

Laryngeal Phthisis.—Those who would make themselves thoroughly conversant with a disease which is beginning to attract considerable at-