

Literature, &c.

FROM BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE FOR JANUARY.

From the Diary of a late Physician.

THE TURNED HEAD.

HYPOCHONDRIASIS, Janus-like, has two faces—a melancholy and a laughable one. The former, though oftener seen in actual life, does not present itself so frequently to the notice of the medical practitioner as the latter; though, in point of fact, one as imperatively calls for his interference as the other. It may be safely asserted, that a permanently morbid mood of mind invariably indicates a disordered state of some part or other of the physical system; and which of the two forms of hypochondria will manifest itself in a particular case, depends altogether upon the mental idiosyncrasy of the patient. Those of a dull, phlegmatic temperament, unstirred by intermixture and collision with the bustling activities of life, addicted to sombrous trains of reflection, and, by a kind of sympathy, always looking on the gloomy side of things, generally sink, at some period or other of their lives, into the "slough of despond"—as old Bunyan significantly terms it—from whence they are seldom altogether extricated. Religious enthusiasts constitute by far the largest portion of those afflicted with this species of hypochondria—instance the wretched Cowper; and such I have never known entirely disabused of these dreadful fantasies. Those, again, of a gay and lively fancy, ardent temperament, and droll grotesque appetencies, exhibit the laughable aspect of hypochondriasis. In such you may expect conceits of the most astounding absurdity that could possibly take possession of the topsy-turvyed intellects of a confirmed lunatic; and persisted in with a pertinacity—a dogged defiance of evidence to the contrary—which is itself as exquisitely ludicrous, as distressing and provoking. There is generally preserved an amazing consistency in the delusion, in spite of the insipient rebuttals of sensation. In short, when once a crotchet, of such a sort as that hereafter mentioned, is fairly entertained in the fancy, the patient will not let it go! It is cases of this kind which baffle the adroitness of medical tactician. For my own part, I have had to deal with several during the course of my practice, which, if described coolly and faithfully on paper, would appear preposterously incredible to a non-professional reader. Such may possibly be the fate of the following. I have given it with a minuteness of detail, in several parts, which I think is warranted, by the interesting nature of the case, by the rarity of such narratives,—and, above all, by the peculiar character and talents of the well-known individual who is the patient; and I am convinced that no one would laugh more heartily over it than he himself—had he not long lain quiet in his grave!

You could scarce'y look on N— without laughing. There was a sorry sort of humorous expression in his odd and ugly features, which suggested to you the idea that he was always struggling to repel some joyous emotion or other, with painful effort. There was the rich light of intellect in his eye, which was dark and full—you felt when its glance was settled upon you;—and there it remained concentrated, at the expense of all the other features;—in the clumsy osseous ridge of eye-bone impending sullenly over his eyes—the Pitt-like nose, looking like a finger and thumb full of dough drawn out from the plastic mass, with two ill-formed holes inserted in the bulbous extremity—and his large liquorish, shapeless lips—looked altogether anything but refined or intellectual. He was a man of fortune—an obstinate bachelor—and was educated at Cambridge, where he attained considerable distinction; and at the period of his introduction to the reader, was in his thirty-eighth or fortieth year. If I were to mention his name, it would recall to the literary reader many excellent, and some admirable portions of literature, for the perusal of which he has to thank N—. The prevailing complexion of his mind was sombrous—but played on occasionally, by an arch-humorous fancy, flung its rays of fun and drollery over the dark surface like moon-beams on midnight waters. I do believe he considered it sinful to smile! There was a puckering up of the corner of the mouth, and a forced corrugation of the eyebrows—the expression of which was set at nought

by the conviviality—the solemn drollery of the eyes. You saw Momus leering out of every glance of them! He said many very witty things in conversation, and had a knack of uttering the quietest conceits with something like a whine of compunction in his tone, which ensured him tears of laughter. As for his own laugh—when he *did* laugh—there is no describing it—short, sudden, unexpected was it, like a flash of powder in the dark. Not a trace of real merriment lingered on his features an instant after the noise had ceased. I began to doubt whether he had laughed at all, and to look about to see where the explosion came from. Except on such rare occasions of forgetfulness on his part, his demeanour was very calm and quiet. He loved to get a man who would come and sit with him all the evening, smoking, and sipping wine in cloudy silence. He could not endure bustle or ostentatiousness; and when he did unfortunately fall foul of a son of noise, as soon as he had had 'a sample of his quality,' he would abruptly rise and take his leave saying, in a querulous tone, like that of a sick child, 'I'll go!' [probably these two words will at once recall him to the memory of more than one of my readers]—and he was as good as his word; for all his acquaintances—and I among the number—knew his eccentricities, and excused them.

Such was the man—at least as to the more prominent points of his character—whose chattering black servant presented himself hastily to my notice one morning, as I was standing on my door-steps, pondering the probabilities of wet or fine for the day. He spoke in such a spluttering tone of trepidation, that it was some time before I could conjecture what was the matter. At length I distinguished something like the words, 'Oh, Docta, Docta, comma, and see—a Massa! Come—a Him so gashly—him so ill—ver dam bad—him say so—Oh lorra—lorra—lorra! Com see—a Massa—him ver orr d!'

'Why, what on earth is the matter with you, you sable, eh?—Why can't you speak slower, and tell me plainly what's the matter?' said I, impatiently, for he seemed inclined to gabble on in that strain for some minutes longer. 'What's the matter with your master, sirrah, eh?' I enquired, jerking his striped morning jacket.

'Oh, Docta! Docta! Com—a—Massa d—n bad! Him say so!—Him head turned! Him head turned!'

'Him what, sirrah?' said I, in amazement.

'Him head turned, Docta—him head turned,' replied the man, slapping his fingers against his forehead.

'Oh, I see how it is, I see; ah, yes,' I replied, pointing to my forehead in turn, wishing him to see that I understood him to say his master had been seized with a fit of insanity.

'Iss, iss, Docta—him Massa head turned—him head turned!—d—n bad!'

'Where is Mr N—, Nambo, eh?'

'Him lying all 'long in him bed, Massa—him d—n bad. But him 'tickle quiet—him head turned!'

'Why, Nambo, what makes you say your master head's turned, eh? What d'ye mean?'

'Him, Massa, self say so—him did—him head—turned—d—n.' I felt as much at a loss as ever; it was so odd for a gentleman to acknowledge to his negro-servant that his head was turned.

'Ah! he's gone mad, you mean, eh—is that it? Hem! Mad—is it so?' said I, pointing, with a wink to my forehead. 'No, no, doctor—him head turned! Him head,' replied Nambo; and raising both his hands to his head, he seemed trying to twist it round! I could make nothing of his gesticulations, so I dismissed him, telling him to take word, that I should make his master's my first call. I may as well say, that I was on terms of friendly familiarity with Mr N—, and puzzled myself all the way I went, with attempting to conjecture what new crotchet he had taken into his odd—and, latterly, I began to suspect, half-added head. He had never disclosed symptoms of what is generally understood by the word hypochondriasis; but I often thought there was not a liker subject in the world for it. At length I found myself knocking at my friend's door, fully prepared for some specimen of amusing eccentricity—for the thought now crossed my mind, that he might be really ill. Nambo instantly

answered my summons, and, in a twinkling, conducted me to his master's bed-room. It was partially darkened, but there was light enough for me to discern, that there was nothing unusual in his appearance. The bed was much tossed, to be sure, as if with the restlessness of the recumbent, who lay on his back, with his head turned on one side, and buried deep in the pillow, and his arms folded together outside the counterpane. His features certainly wore an air of exhaustion and dejection, and his eye settled on me with an alarmed expression from the moment that he perceived my entrance.

'Oh, dear doctor!—Isn't this frightful!—Isn't it a dreadful piece of business?'

'Frightful!—dreadful business!' I repeated, with much surprise. 'What is frightful? Are you ill—have you had an accident, eh?'

'Ah—ah!—you may well ask that!' he replied; and, after a pause, 'it took place this morning about two hours ago!'

'You speak in parables, Mr N—! Why, what in the world is the matter with you?'

'About two hours ago—yes,' he muttered, as if he had not heard me. 'Doctor, do tell me truly now, is the curiosity of the thing, what did you think of me first entering the room?—Eh?—Feel inclined to laugh or be shocked—wh ch?'

'Mr N—, I really have no time for trifling, as I am particularly busy to-day. Do, I beg, be a little more explicit! Why have you sent for me?—What's the matter with you?'

'Why, God bless me, doctor!' he replied, with an air of angry surprise in his manner which I never saw before, 'I think, indeed, it's you who are trifling! Have you lost your eye sight this morning? Do you pretend to say you do not see I have undergone one of the most extraordinary alterations in appearance, that the body of man is capable of—such as never was heard of or read of before?'

'Once more, Mr. N—,' I repeated, in a tone of calm astonishment, 'be so good as to be explicit! What are you raving about?'

'Raving!—Egad, I think it's you who are raving, doctor!' he answered; 'or you must wish to insult me! Do you pretend to tell me you do not see that my head is turned?'—and he looked me in the face steadily and sternly.

'Ha—ha—ha!—Upon my honour, N—, I have been suspecting as much for this last five or ten minutes! I don't think a patient ever described his disease more accurately before!'

'Don't mock me, Doctor —,' replied N— sternly. 'By G—, I can't bear it! It's enough for me to endure the horrid sensations I do!'

'Mr. N—, what do you?'

'Why, d—n, Doctor —! you'll drive me mad!—Can't you see that the back of my head is in front and my face looking backwards? Horrible! I burst into loud laughter.

'Doctor —, it's time for you and me to part high time,' said he, turning his face from me. 'I let you know that I'll stand your nonsense no longer! I called you in to give me your advice, not to sit grinning like a baboon by my bedside! Once more, finally: Doctor —, are you disposed to be serious and rational? If you are not, my man shall show you to the door the moment you please.' He said this with such a sober earnest tone of indignation, that I saw he was fully prepared to carry his threat into execution. I determined, therefore, to humour him a little, shrewdly suspecting some temporary suspension of his sanity—not exactly madness—but a sort of extraordinary—dinary hallucination. To adopt an expression which I have several times heard in use—'I saw what o'clock it was, and set my watch to the time.'

'Oh—well!—I see —,' I said, 'the extraordinary posture of affairs is, I did observe immediately I had entered the room you complain of—immediately I had entered the room, but supposed you were joking with me, and twisting your head round in that odd way for the purpose of hoaxing me; so I resolved to wait and see which of us could play the parts in the farce longest!—Who, good God! bows all this, Mr. —?—Is it then really the case?—Are you—in earnest—in having your head turned?'—'In earnest, doctor!' replied Mr. N—, in amazement. 'Why, do you suppose this