

Post-Mortem Recollections of a Medical Lecturer

By Charles Lever

‘To die—to sleep—perchance to dream:—
Ay; there’s the rub.’

Hamlet

It was already near four o’clock ere I bethought me of making any preparation for my lecture. The day had been, throughout, one of those heavy and sultry ones autumn so often brings in our climate, and I felt from this cause much oppressed and disinclined to exertion; independently of the fact, that I had been greatly over-fatigued during the preceding week,—some cases of a most trying and arduous nature having fallen to my lot—one of which, from the importance of the life to a young and dependent family, had engrossed much of my attention, and aroused in me the warmest anxiety for success. In this frame of mind I was entering my carriage, to proceed to the lecture-room, when an unsealed note was put into my hands: I opened it hastily, and read that poor H—, for whom I was so deeply interested, had just expired. I was greatly shocked. It was scarcely an hour since I had seen him, and from the apparent improvement since my former visit, had ventured to speak most encouragingly; and had even made some jesting allusion to the speedy prospect of his once more resuming his place at ‘hearth and board.’ Alas! how short-lived were my hopes destined to be! how awfully was my prophecy to be contradicted!

No one but he who has himself experienced it, knows anything of the deep and heartfelt interest a medical man takes in many of the cases which professionally come before him; I speak here of an interest perfectly apart from all personal regard for the patient or his friends. Indeed, the feeling I allude to, has nothing in common with this, and will often be experienced as thoroughly for a perfect stranger as for one known and respected for years.

To the extreme of this feeling I was ever a victim. The heavy responsibility, often suddenly and unexpectedly imposed—the struggle for success, when success was all but hopeless—the intense anxiety for the arrival of those critical periods which change the character of a malady, and divest it of some of its dangers, or invest it with new ones—the despondence when that period has come only to confirm all the worst symptoms, and shut out every prospect of recovery—and, last of all, that most trying, of all the trying duties of my profession, the breaking to the perhaps unconscious relatives, that my art had failed, my resources were exhausted, in a word, that there was no longer a hope.

These things have preyed on me for weeks, for months long, and many an effort have I made in secret to combat this feeling, but without the least success, till at last I absolutely dreaded the very thought of being sent for, to a dangerous and critical illness. It may then be believed how very heavily the news I had just received came upon me: the blow, too, was not even lessened by the poor consolation of my having anticipated the result, and broken the shock to the family.

I was still standing with the half-opened note in my hands, when I was aroused by the coachman asking, I believe for the third time, whither he should drive to?—I bethought me for an instant, and said, ‘To the lecture-room.’

When in health, lecturing had ever been to me more of an amusement than a labour; and often, in the busy hours of professional visiting, have I longed for the time when I should come before my class, and divesting my mind of all individual details, launch forth into the more abstract and

speculative doctrines of my art. It so chanced, too, that the late hour at which I lectured, as well as the subjects I adopted, usually drew to my class many of the advanced members of the profession, who made this a lounge after the fatigues of the morning.

Now, however, I approached this duty with fear and trembling: the events of the morning had depressed my mind greatly, and I longed for rest and retirement. The passing glance I threw at the lecture-room, through the half-opened door, showed it to be crowded to the very roof; and as I walked along the corridor, I heard the name of some foreign physician of eminence, who was among my auditory. I cannot describe the agitation of mind I felt at this moment. My confusion, too, became greater as I remembered that the few notes I had drawn up, were left in the pocket of the carriage, which I had just dismissed, intending to return on foot. It was already considerably past the usual hour, and I was utterly unable to decide how to proceed. I hastily drew out a portfolio that contained many scattered notes, and hints for lectures, and hurriedly throwing my eye across them, discovered some singular memoranda on the subject of insanity. On these I resolved at once to dilate a little, and if possible eke out the materials for a lecture.

The events of the remainder of that day are wrapt in much obscurity to my mind, yet I well remember the loud thunders of applause which greeted me on entering the lecture-room, and how, as for some moments I appeared to hesitate, they were renewed again and again, till, at last summoning resolution, I collected myself sufficiently to open my discourse. I well remember, too, the difficulty the first few sentences cost me,—the doubts, the fears, the pauses, which beset me at every step, as I went on. My anxiety to be clear and accurate in conveying my meaning, making me recapitulate and repeat, till I felt myself, as it were, working in a circle. By degrees, however, I grew warmed as I proceeded, and the evident signs of attention my auditory exhibited, gave me renewed courage, while they impressed me with the necessity to make a more than common exertion. By degrees, too, I felt the mist clearing from my brain, and that even without effort, my ideas came faster, and my words fell from me with ease and rapidity. Simile and illustration came in abundance; and distinctions, which had hitherto struck me as the most subtle and difficult of description, I now drew with readiness and accuracy. Points of an abstruse and recondite nature, which, under other circumstances, I should not have wished to touch upon, I now approached fearlessly and boldly, and felt that in the very moment of speaking, they became clearer and clearer to myself. Theories and hypotheses, which were of old, and acknowledged acceptance, I glanced hurriedly at as I went on, and with a perspicuity and clearness I never before felt exposed their fallacies, and unmasked their errors. I thought I was rather describing events, and things passing actually before my eyes at the instant, than relating the results of a life's experience and reflection. My memory, usually a defective one, now carried me back to the days of my early childhood; and the whole passages of a life long, lay displayed before me like a picture. If I quoted, the very words of the author rushed to my mind as palpably, as though the page lay open before me. I have still some vague recollection of an endeavour I made to trace the character of the insanity in every case to some early trait of the individual in childhood, when overcome by passion or overbalanced by excitement, the faculties run wild into all those excesses, which, in after years, develop eccentricities of character, and in some weaker temperaments, aberrations of intellect. Anecdotes illustrating this novel position came thronging to my mind; and events in the early years of some who subsequently died insane, and seemed to support my theory, came rushing to my memory. As I proceeded, I became gradually more and more excited—the very ease and rapidity with which my ideas suggested themselves, increased the fervour of my imaginings—till at last, I felt my words came without effort, and spontaneously, while there seemed a co-mingling of my thoughts, which left me unable to trace

connexion between them, while I continued to speak as fluently as before. I felt at this instant a species of indistinct terror of some unknown danger which impended me, yet which was impossible for me to avert or avoid. I was like one who, borne on the rapid current of a fast flowing river, sees the foam of a cataract before him, yet waits passively for the moment of his destruction, without an effort to save. The power which maintained my mind in its balance had gradually forsaken me, and shapes and fantasies of every odd and fantastic character flitted around and about me. The ideas and descriptions my mind had conjured up, assumed a living, breathing vitality—and I felt like a necromancer waving his wand over the living and the dead. I paused—there was a dead silence in the lecture room—a thought rushed like a meteor flash across my brain, and, bursting forth into a loud laugh of hysteric passion, I cried—and I, and I—too, am a maniac. My class rose like one man—a cry of horror burst through the room. I know no more.

I was ill, very ill, and in bed. I looked around me—every object was familiar to me. Through the half closed window curtain there streamed one long line of red sunlight—I felt it was evening. There was no one in the room, and, as I endeavoured to recall my scattered thoughts sufficiently to find out why I was thus, there came an oppressive weakness over me—I closed my eyes, and tried to sleep. I was roused by some one entering the room—it was my friend Dr G—; he walked stealthily towards my bed, and looked at me fixedly for several minutes. I watched him closely, and saw that his countenance changed as he looked on me; I felt his hand tremble slightly as he placed it on my wrist, and heard him mutter to himself, in a low tone, My God! how altered! I heard now a voice at the door, saying in a soft whisper—may I come in. The doctor made no reply, and my wife glided gently into the apartment. She looked deathly pale, and appeared to have been weeping. She leaned over me, and I felt the warm tears fall one by one upon my forehead. She took my hand within both of her's, and putting her lips to my ear, said, 'Do you know *me*, William?' There was a long pause. I tried to speak; but I could not—I endeavoured to make some sign of recognition, and stared her fully in the face; but I heard her say in a broken voice, 'he does not know *me* now'; and then I felt it was in vain. The doctor came over, and, taking my wife's hand, endeavoured to lead her from the room. I heard her say, 'not now, not now'; and I sank back into a heavy unconsciousness.

I awoke from what appeared to have been a long and deep sleep. I was, however, unrefreshed and unrested. My eyes were dimmed and clouded—and I in vain tried to ascertain if there was any one in the room with me. The acute sensation of fever had subsided, and left behind the most lowering and depressing debility. As by degrees I came to myself, I found that the doctor was sitting beside my bed—he bent over me and said—'Are you better, William?' Never till now, had my inability to reply given me any pain or uneasiness—now, however, the abortive struggle to speak was torture. I thought and felt that my senses were gradually yielding beneath me, and a cold shuddering at my heart told me that the hand of death was upon me. The exertion now made to repel the fatal lethargy, must have been great—for a cold, clammy perspiration broke profusely over my body, a rushing sound, as if water filled my ears—a succession of short convulsive spasms, as if given by an electric machine, shook my limbs. I grasped the doctor's hand firmly in mine, and starting to the sitting posture, I looked wildly about me. My breathing became shorter and shorter: my grasp relaxed: my eyes swam: and I fell back heavily in the bed: the last recollection of that moment was the muttered expression of my poor friend G—, saying— 'It is over at last.'

Many hours must have elapsed ere I returned to any consciousness. My first sensation was feeling the cold wind across my face, which seemed to come from an open window. My eyes

were closed, and my lids felt as if pressed down by a weight. My arms lay along my side, and though the position in which I lay was constrained and unpleasant, I could make no effort to alter it—I tried to speak, but could not.

As I lay thus, the footsteps of many persons traversing the apartment, broke upon my ear, followed by a heavy dull sound, as if some weighty body had been laid upon the floor—a harsh voice of one near me now said, as if reading, ‘William H—, aged 38 years—I thought him much more.’ The words rushed through my brain, and with the rapidity of a lightning flash, every circumstance of my illness came before me, and I now knew that I had died, and for my interment were intended the awful preparations about me. Was this then death? Could it be, that though coldness wrapt the suffering clay, passion and sense should still survive—and that while every external trace of life had fled, consciousness should still cling to the cold corpse destined for the earth. Oh! how horrible, how more than horrible! the terror of that thought. Then I thought it might be what is termed a trance, but that poor hope deserted me, as I brought to mind the words of the doctor, who knew too well all the unerring signs of death to be deceived by its counterfeit, and my heart sank as they lifted me into the coffin, and I felt that my limbs had stiffened, and I knew this never took place in a trance. How shall I tell the heart-cutting anguish of that moment, as my mind looked forward to a futurity too dreadful to think upon; when memory should call up many a sunny hour of existence, the loss of friends, the triumph of exertion, and then fall back upon the dread consciousness of the ever busied life the grave closed over—and then I thought that perhaps sense but lingered round the lifeless clay, as the spirits of the dead are said to hover around the places and homes they had loved in life, ere they leave them for ever—and that soon the lamp should expire upon the shrine, when the temple that sheltered it lay mouldering and in ruins.—Alas! how fearful to dream of even the happiness of the past, in that cold grave where the worm only is a reveller—to think that though—

Friends, brothers, and sisters, are laid side by side,
Yet none have e’er questioned, nor none have replied.

Yet that all felt in their cold and mouldering hearts the loves and the affections of life, budding and blossoming as though the stem was not rotting to corruption that bore them. I brought to mind the awful punishment of the despot, who chained the living to the dead man, and thought it mercy when compared to this.

How long I lay thus I know not, but the dreary silence of the chamber was again broken, and I found that some of my dearest friends were come to take a farewell look of me, ere the coffin was closed on me for ever. Again the horror of my state struck me with all its forcible reality; and like a meteor there shot through my heart, the bitterness of years of misery, condensed into the space of a minute. And then I remembered how gradual is death, and how by degrees it creeps over every portion of the frame-like the track of the destroyer, blighting as it goes—and said to my heart, all may yet be still within me, and the mind as lifeless as the body it dwelt in; and yet these feelings partook of life in all their strength and vigour. There, was the *will* to move, to speak, to see, to live—and yet all was torpid and inactive, as though it had never lived. Was it that the nerves, from some depressing cause, had ceased to transmit the influence of the brain? had these winged messengers of the mind refused their office?—and then I called to mind the almost miraculous efficacy of the will, exerted under circumstances of great exigency, and with a concentration of power, that some men are only capable of. I had heard of the Indian father who suckled his child at his own bosom, when he had laid its mother in the grave; yet was it not the

will had wrought this miracle? I myself had seen the paralytic limb awake to life and motion, by the powerful application of the mind stimulating the nervous channels of communication, and awakening the dormant powers of vitality to their exercise. I knew of one whose heart beat fast or slow as he did will it. Yes! thought I, in a transport, the will to live, is the power to live; and only when this faculty has yielded with bodily strength, need death be the conqueror over us. The thought of reanimation was extatic;—but I dare not dwell upon it—the moments passed rapidly on, and even now the last preparations were about to be made, ere they committed my body to the grave. And how was the effort to be made? If the will did indeed possess the power trusted in, how was it to be applied? I had often wished to speak or move during my illness, yet was unable to do either. I then remembered that in those cases where the will had worked its wonders, the powers of the mind had entirely centered themselves in the one heart-filling desire to accomplish a certain object—as the athlete in the games strains every muscle to lift some ponderous weight. And thus, I knew, that if the heart could be so subjected to the principle of volition, as that, yielding to its impulse, it would again transmit the blood along its accustomed channels, and that then the lungs should be brought to act upon the blood, by the same agency, the other functions of the body would more readily be restored, by the sympathy with these great ones. Besides, I trusted, that so long as the powers of the mind existed in the vigour I felt them in, that much of what might be called, latent vitality, existed in the body;—then I set myself to think upon those nerves which preside over the action of the heart—their origin, their course, their distribution, their relation, their sympathies. I traced them as they arose in the brain, and tracked them till they were lost in millions of tender threads upon the muscle of the heart. I thought, too, upon the lungs as they lay flaccid and collapsed within my chest—the life blood stagnant in their vessels, and tried to possess my mind with the relation of these two parts, to the utter exclusion of every other. I endeavoured then to transmit along the nerves, the impulse of that faculty my whole hope rested on; alas, it was in vain—I tried to heave my chest and breathe, but could not—my heart sank within me—and all my former terrors came thickening around me, more dreadful by far, as the stir and bustle in the room indicated, they were about to close the coffin. At this moment, my dear friend B— entered the room—he had come many miles to see me once more, and they made way for him to approach me as I lay. He placed his warm hand upon my breast, and, oh! the throb it sent through my heart. Again, but almost unconsciously to myself, the impulse rushed along my nerves—a bursting sensation seized my chest—a tingling ran through my frame—a crashing, jarring sensation, as if the tense nervous cords were vibrating to some sudden and severe shock, took hold on me; and then after one violent convulsive throe, which brought the blood from my mouth and eyes, my heart swelled at first slowly, then faster; and the valves reverberated, clank!—clank!—responsive to the stroke, at the same time the chest expanded, the muscles strained like the cordage of a ship in a heavy sea, and I breathed once more. While thus the faint impulse to returning life was given, the dread thought flashed on me that it might not be real, and that to my own imagination alone, were referable, the phenomena I experienced. At the very instant the gloomy doubt crossed my mind, it was dispelled, for I heard a cry of horror through the room, and the words—He is alive—he still lives—from a number of voices around me. The noise and confusion increased: I heard them say, carry out B— before he sees him again—he has fainted! Directions, and exclamations of wonder, and dread followed one upon another, and I can but call to mind the lifting me from the coffin, and the feeling of returning warmth I experienced, as I was placed before a fire, and supported by the arms of my friends.

I will only add, that after some weeks of painful debility, I was again restored to health—
having tasted the full bitterness of death.