

The Merchant of Venice : a short study in borderland melancholy / by J. Foster Palmer.

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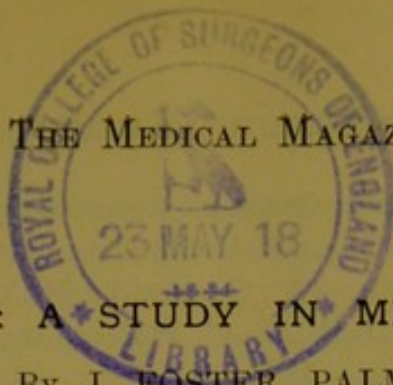
Is this play we have
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 costs him his life. It
 Shakespeare wiser than
 Polonius. It might be
 "never said a foolish thing"

Of Hamlet's mental
 His hallucinations are not
 a suicidal tendency before
 onset of the disease is clear

"O, that the
 Thaw and re-
 Or that the
 His career's

The depression of a
 "risk for existence" as
 Words could not give a
 At any rate, words never

"How weary
 seem to me
 For on I'll sit
 That grows to
 Penance it is



17.

HAMLET: A STUDY IN MELANCHOLIA.

By J. FOSTER PALMER.

IN this play we have two distinct cases of insanity. Scientific pedantry, indeed, might be inclined to increase the number to five, for Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio all had, like Hamlet, a visual impression of the form of Hamlet's father, "Armèd at point exactly, cap-a-pe." Their hallucinations, however, even if not introduced solely for dramatic effect, are unlike Hamlet's. They have no delusions of sound (unless, indeed, they are supposed to hear the departed ghost calling on them to swear). They cease after the appearance of Hamlet on the scene, and are not accompanied by any other symptoms. In any case a single temporary hallucination, the result of some strong mental impression, would not constitute insanity. Nor is Polonius by any means insane. His concrete folly is merely emphasised by his abstract wisdom. His theories are sound, his generalisations unexceptionable; but when he attempts to apply them in particular instances they always fail him, and make him appear ridiculous. In the end, indeed, his misapplication of them costs him his life. It has been said that "there is nothing in Shakespeare wiser than the sayings, or foolisher than the doings, of Polonius." It might be said of him, as it was of Charles II., that he "never *said* a foolish thing, and never *did* a wise one."

Of Hamlet's mental disturbance, however, there is no doubt. His hallucinations are not the first or only symptoms. He had shown a suicidal tendency *before* seeing his father's ghost. The gradual onset of the disease is clearly shown.

"O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew !
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter !" — (Act I, Sc. 2, 129-132.)

The depression of spirits and the characteristic absence of all "relish for existence" are forcibly expressed in the same speech. Words could not give a more perfect description of this condition. At any rate, words never have.

"How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world !
Fie on't ! ah fie ! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed : things rank, and gross in nature
Possess it merely." — (133-137.)

On the motion of Dr. BENSLEY, seconded by Dr. BALDING, and duly carried, the following gentlemen were elected members of the Council of the Society:—A. G. Auld, M.D., M.R.C.P.; C. W. Glassington, M.R.C.S., L.D.S.; J. C. Pollock Muir, L.R.C.P. and S.; Harold Robert Dacre Spitta, M.D., D.P.H.

On the motion of Dr. CRICHTON, seconded by Dr. CAMBRIDGE, Messrs. J. H. Duncan and Company were re-elected Auditors for the Society for the coming year at the remuneration of fifteen guineas.

The CHAIRMAN said—I will now ask you to re-elect our two Secretaries, Dr. Hugh Woods as General Secretary, and Mr. Foulerton as Financial Secretary. Dr. Woods has served us well for years, and the members know how courteously and well he acts when they come to him to lay their troubles before him. Of Mr. Foulerton I will only say that he takes up the work of the Treasurer and he does it most efficiently. I therefore move from the chair that the two Secretaries be re-elected.

Dr. BALDING said that he felt all would be agreed in recognising these gentlemen as most efficient officers for their respective positions.

On this being put to the meeting it was carried with acclamation.

The CHAIRMAN asked if anyone present had any further question to ask, and as no one replied, declared the meeting at an end.

Before separating, on the motion of Dr. STOWERS, a cordial vote of thanks was accorded to Dr. Heron for taking the chair.

Upon this morbid, this eminently receptive condition of mind, comes, after a short interval, with or without extrinsic suggestion, the hallucination of his father's form. The causes of this morbid condition, so far as they are mental, are quite obvious. An impressionable, neurotic nature; the sudden and unexpected death of his father; the equally sudden and surprising development of criminal sensuality in his mother, and her consequent faithlessness to his memory; and, combined with this, a deep-seated but gradually increasing suspicion of foul play, with harassing doubts as to her possible knowledge or connivance. These doubts, perhaps, are never fully cleared up, but the primary suspicion is amply justified. This, however, does not affect the question of insanity, which depends not on the reasonableness or accuracy of the opinion held, but on the effect it produces on the mental condition.* "The belief may be rational and well founded, but it may still exercise an undue action on feeling and conduct, breaking up those finer judgments and processes of thought by which the sound mind is regulated."†

Insanity, as Gooch pertinently remarks, consists, "not in the groundlessness and unreasonableness of the predominant belief, but in its withdrawing the attention from all other thoughts and pursuits, in its overwhelming influence over the feelings and conduct."‡ Hamlet had brooded over the subject of his father's death, and, his reasoning faculty being disturbed, he was no longer able to see it from a normal point of view. He had reasoned rightly with regard to the event, but he had dwelt too long and too persistently on his suspicions, and he was now unable to judge rightly what he ought to do, and devoid of the will-power to do it if he knew. It is this which chiefly distinguishes the case from one of ordinary depression, or what is called "natural melancholy." The *will* is paralysed, and the mental effect is out of proportion to the causes, distressing as these may be. There is brain disturbance independent of them. The actual disease is primary, not secondary. He himself, and this is a most important symptom, is unable to attribute his condition to any definite cause.

"I have of late—but *wherefore* I know not—
Lost all my mirth."—(Act II., Sc. 2, 306-7.)

It is not a melancholy man becoming more so, but a complete change to morbid gloom and depression in a nature witty and cheerful as well as highly intellectual. And then, to "make assurance doubly

* *Vide* "Thoughts on Insanity as an Object of Moral Science." By R. Gooch. Transactions of the New Sydenham Society, vol. II, page 87.

† *Ibid.*, page xv. Preface by R. Ferguson, M.D.

‡ *Ibid.*, page 97.

sure," we have the hallucination following close upon the other symptoms. The disturbing mental impressions had been planted in soil prepared to harbour them. The appearance of the ghost was just the natural psychological sequence of the mental condition. Its form and words were simply the more distinct embodiment of the impressions already existing in his inner consciousness. In the words of Persius, "*Quod petis in te est*"; or in Pope's paraphrase—

"Son, what thou seek'st is in thee! Look and find:
Each monster meets his likeness in thy mind."*

At first sight it almost appears as if the greater had arisen out of the less, as if the suggestion of an apparition had originated with Bernardo and Marcellus, and been transferred by them to Horatio, and that the suggestion of Horatio and his friends had produced the greater and more complete hallucination in Hamlet. This, of course, is not impossible. A slight suggestion, acting on Hamlet's disordered and receptive nervous system, might assume far greater proportions than before. His morbid imagination would inevitably fill in all the blanks left by the suggesters. Still, it is more reasonable to suppose that the idea originated in Hamlet's mind, and that it had been by one or more of the numerous methods of suggestion conveyed to Horatio and his friends. This was, of course, "before the play began," as Mr. Puff would say, but we find him, on one occasion, anticipating the ghost's appearance by a suggestion which can hardly have been the first of its kind.

HAMLET—"Methinks, I see my father."

HORATIO—"Where, my lord?"

HAMLET—"In my mind's eye, Horatio."—(Act I, Sc. 2, 184, 185.)

The vision was already there, in his mind, but not projected.

In his mind, too, was the vision of his father's murder. The ghost told him nothing that he did not know before. It was only a more clearly-defined expression of what he had already formulated. It will be observed that the ghost does not clear up even the most harassing doubt of all, the complicity or otherwise of his mother. It leaves him just where it found him. He was practically sure of his uncle's guilt, and the projected vision embodies his thought, but as to his mother's connivance he was absolutely in the dark, and, naturally, the concrete embodiment of his thought cannot solve the difficulty.

Up to this point we see in Hamlet a case of melancholia of quite a usual and almost typical kind. We have at first the undefined feeling of depression, until gradually "the whole existence, mental and bodily, is overwhelmed and oppressed by gloom, anxiety, and

* Dunciad. Book III, v. 251-252.

foreboding.* In the early stages there are usually, as in this case, no delusions. These come on later, as the morbid ideas assume a more definite shape. On all subjects unconnected with these particular ideas the patient is able to converse quite rationally; and, finally, we have here clearly indicated, what is so prominent a symptom in these cases, a *tendency* to suicide: a tendency, in this case, kept in abeyance by a high development of the reasoning and moral faculties. Hallucinations are by no means a constant, nor even, perhaps, a frequent concomitant of melancholia. That they do occur there can be no doubt. Indeed, it is inconceivable that "the rise of subject consciousness" characteristic of the disease should always stop short of visual projection. The hallucination, too, in this case, coincides with a further phase in the progress of the disease. It has now assumed a more distinct form. It is by no means uncommon for a melancholic patient, after a long period of struggling, to adopt a certain resolution, often of a horrible, and even murderous, character. He feels that he has a "burden on his soul"; that a certain duty has to be performed, and that he will get no peace of mind till he has performed it. The mere acceptance and adoption of this resolution often gives great relief to the previous symptoms. He is no longer in the former harassing state of perplexity and uncertainty, and the overwhelming feeling of gloom and oppression gives place to a whole-hearted desire to carry out the supposed duty. All the faculties of the mind are now concentrated on the object in view, instead of being dissipated in the vain and purposeless attempt to solve vague doubts and difficulties. This condition is called by Hoffbauer the "Incitement of an obligatory resolution."† It is at this point, after the apparition of his father, that the resolution assumes a definite form. It is in the speech which follows the disappearance of the ghost, commencing with "O all you

* Quain's Dictionary of Medicine. Art. Insanity. By G. F. Blandford, M.D. It may be mentioned here that it was not till after Shakespeare's time that the word melancholia was used to express a definite mental affection. Shakespeare, it will be observed, does not use the word melancholy even quite in this sense. When he does use it (as in Act II, Sc. 2, 630), it has a more undefined meaning, and refers to a general bodily and mental debility, and a susceptibility to impressions from without. In *Love's Labour's Lost* (Act I, Sc. 2, 1-5) it is employed by the euphuist Armado simply as synonymous with "*sadness*." In *Twelfth Night* and (as an adjective) in *The Merchant of Venice*, it has another meaning, one more in accordance with its derivation (*μέλαν χολή*—black bile), and the mental symptoms that were supposed to arise out of this bodily condition. Antonio, apparently, is suffering from a mild attack of melancholia (for it is more than mere depression, and he seems unable to account for it), of which he is cured by the shock of his subsequent danger, but Gratiano was not aware of this, and even accuses him of assuming a gravity and surliness of manner in order to increase his reputation for wisdom (*Merchant of Venice*, Act 1, Sc. 1, 101).

† Die Psychologie in ihren Hauptanwendungen auf die Rechtspflege.

host of heaven!" and ending with "I have sworn't" (Act I, Sc. 5, 92-112), that he takes this burden upon him. Now, for the time, his spirits revive, and when he rejoins his friends he is almost jocund, in spite of the horror of the situation. He has now an "obsession." The active intensity of this obsession, at first sight, is almost suggestive of neurasthenia, but its constancy, together with the other markedly characteristic symptoms, shows that the disease was essentially one of melancholia, although there may have been certain neurasthenic symptoms superadded.

From this time, too, there is another factor in the case. The author, who knew so well the symptoms of melancholia, knew also that they were not such as would convince outsiders of the patient's insanity. He, therefore, now assumes those of a more conventional type of insanity, the better to avert suspicion of his ultimate intent.* In this he is, for the time, completely successful. In the next scene (Act II. Sc. 1, 85-110) Polonius speaks of him as "mad" (Sc. 2, 49, 92-100, 207, etc.). His "madness," "lunacy," "ecstasy," are constantly alluded to in the second and third acts.

In the fourth and fifth, however, though still spoken of, it is clearly not believed in either by the King or the Queen. Polonius, who had been taken in by his somewhat over-acted simulations, is now no more; even he, on occasion, had half-suspected their genuineness, but was unwilling to relinquish the position he had taken up with regard to its nature and causation. He endeavours, therefore, to explain away his own suspicions.

* As I have previously pointed out, it is only in the field of psychology that the author shows a degree of insight which almost seems to suggest infallibility, or, at any rate, prophetic insight. In other branches of science he is little, if at all, in advance of his age. In the present play the ghost describes his murder by what is, apparently, some concentrated extract or alkaloid of hyoscyamus (possibly hyoscyne) :—

"whose effect

Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That, swift as quicksilver, it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body ;
And, with a sudden vigour it doth p sset
And curd like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood : so did it mine ;
And a most instant tetter bark'd about,
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,
All my smooth body."—(Act I, Sc. 4, 64-73.)

He had evidently heard or read somewhere that hyoscyamus, in large doses, produces an "eruption of the skin" (*vide* E. G. Garrod's *Materia Medica*, third edition, page 292). This statement he exploited until it became what appears to be a sudden and fully developed attack of impetigo or eczema covering the entire surface of the body immediately after the administration of a poisonous dose of the drug. It was not a corrosive poison, for it is described as *first* passing through the circulation, and it is hardly the effect of a narcotic.

"Though this be madness, yet there is method in it."

—(Act II, Sc. 2, 208-209.)

"How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of."—(212-215.)

Meanwhile, the symptoms of melancholia, including the suicidal tendency, still continue, though in a mitigated form. There is a distinct improvement in the mental condition. The speech, commencing "To be, or not to be," in Act III, is saner, and altogether less pessimistic than that commencing "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt!" in Act I. In the former there is a more even mental balance. The question is stated in an arguable manner. He sees there are two sides to it. In the earlier speech, the view that "life was not worth living" is accepted almost as an axiom, and only a strong religious conviction prevents its being followed to its logical conclusion. The reasoning powers, so far, at least, as they tend to support the desire to live, are crushed by the overwhelming force of the emotional tendency to self-destruction. In the later speech they have begun to re-assert themselves, and although they do not make out a very strong case in favour of life, they succeed in evolving certain potent forces against its premature and obligatory extinction. In the first speech the tendency of the will is all in favour of suicide. In the second it is practically neutral. There is no strong desire to live, but there is an acceptance of the contention that a premature death might be at least equally undesirable.

"And makes us rather bear those ills we have,

Than fly to others that we know not of."—(Act. III, Sc. 1, 81-82.)

This is a step in the right direction. The prognosis is now favourable. There is a fairly good hope of ultimate recovery.

The improvement, too, is progressive. We have already had, in the speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act II, an earlier suggestion of it. Even here, the world is no longer "an unweeded garden" entirely possessed by "things rank and gross in nature." (Act 1, Sc. 2, 135, 136). He recognises its grandeur and beauty, but is unable to feel the pleasing impression these might be supposed to impart to a normal mind:—"This goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory: this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'er-hanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours" (Act II, Sc. 2, 309-315). "Man delights not me (322); no, nor woman neither" (323). There is, also, in this Act, another sign of an improving mental condition, although the patient himself does not recognize it as such. The "incitement of an obligatory resolution" to murder is gradually

passing off. Things begin to wear a different aspect. He condemns himself for it. His motives are not yet clear to himself. He thinks it is cowardice, slackness, lack of determination to do his duty. It is nothing of the kind. It is the commencing re-ascendancy of reason. It is reason and conscience combining to point out to him the better way, to show him that he had no right to appoint himself the minister of vengeance; that even if he had that right, there was no shadow of justice in passing sentence on the sole evidence of a delusion springing from his own disordered imagination.

"The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil; and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and, perhaps,
Out of my weakness, and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me: I'll have grounds
More relative than this: The play's the thing,
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

— Act II, Sc. 2, 627-634.)

Immediately following the carefully reasoned speech at the beginning of the third act ("To be, or not to be"), we have the interview with Ophelia. The inconsequent reasonings of this interview are evidently assumed. He clearly suspects that it has been arranged, and that there are listeners, and therefore he must keep up, in appearance, the conventional idea of insanity. They bear a strong resemblance to the "methodical madness" of the previous act, but are tinged with the introspective pessimism of his real disorder. "I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me" (Act III, Sc. 1, 123-126).

This speech gives a clue to the nature of his disorder which we have not had before. Though by no means an ordinary or typical case, it shows that it included, as one of its factors, that morbid introspection which is so characteristic a feature of what we commonly speak of as religious melancholia. The disturbed mental action seems to have been first excited by the evil deeds of his own mother and uncle, which he had dwelt upon until they seemed to have developed into a universal catastrophe.

"O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
And shall I couple he!?"—(Act I, Sc. 5, 92, 93.)
"The time is out of joint."—(Act I, Sc. 5, 189.)

In the second scene of the third act there are no signs of madness. None, certainly, in his lecture on elocution to the players, a lecture which has been quoted ever since by those who teach the subject. None in his affectionate speech to Horatio, in which he explains to him the method by which he intends to verify or disprove his

suspicious and test the trend of his hallucinations. None in his semi-frivolous behaviour during the play, the reason of which he has explained to Horatio.

"They are coming to the play; I must be idle."

—(Act III, Sc. 2, 95.)

None in his clear detective methods, and the subsequent statement to Horatio of the conclusions he based upon them. Whether the ghost was subjective or objective, he cares not; it made no difference: whether it had really appeared to him or was merely the reflection of his own suspicions, it mattered not; the impression made upon him was a true one. He had not suspected wrongly.

"O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word

for a thousand pound."—(Act III, Sc. 2, 297, 298.)

None in his well worded repartees to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Although he says "my wit's diseased," this is just the awakening recognition by the restored mental functions of their former disturbance, exaggerated to keep up the appearance of insanity. None in his final fooling with Polonius, and none, certainly none, in his last speech in this scene, in which he imposes on himself the difficult task of upbraiding, and yet sparing, his mother, of steering, in his treatment of her, between the Scylla of Orestes and the Charybdis of a culpable connivance in criminality.

"let not ever

The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom:

Let me be cruel, not unnatural:

I will speak daggers to her, but use none:

My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites:

How in my words see'er she be shent,

To give them seals, never, my soul, consent!"

—(Act III, Sc. 2, 411-417.)

All this, however, by no means proves that he is fully restored to his normal mental condition. He had recovered, no doubt, to a very great extent, and showed unmistakeable signs of progress towards complete recovery. The rapid succession of events, the necessity for constant vigorous mental action, even the factor of personal danger to himself, had all tended to direct his thoughts into a more healthy channel, and had practically driven out that demon of introspection, that exhausting yet fruitless intensity of subjective brain action so characteristic of cases of melancholia. The cerebral action had become normally and vigorously active, steady and healthful, but not yet stable. It was still liable, in the presence of exciting causes, to a recrudescence of the previous disturbance. This factor presents itself in the next scene, and produces a partial and temporary, though only a partial and temporary, relapse. He now, practically for the first

time, comes face to face with the long looked-for opportunity to relieve himself of the burden he had laid upon his soul, to indulge that "incitement of an obligatory resolution" which loomed so largely in his mental condition when at its worst. The temptation is supreme, and at first he seems to yield to it.

"Now might I do it, pat, now he is praying :
And now I'll do't."—(Act III, Sc. 3, 73, 74.)

He does not do it. His motives for not doing it are mixed. He cannot truly define them himself. He cannot yet fully distinguish between right and wrong, from what is right from the point of view of sound reason, and what seemed right to his diseased imagination. There is a fierce struggle for ascendancy between reason and insanity. His reason, his real inner conscience, tells him the deed should not be done. The resuscitated forces of his mental abnormality tell him it should. Conscience gains the victory, and he decides not to commit the murder. The reasons he gives himself for his decision, however, are not the true ones. They are *ex post facto*. They are really in the nature of an excuse, a concession to his re-awakened mental disorder, which he is unable, at present, to differentiate from his sounder reason. He has decided to refrain, when the impulse comes upon him once more, and this impulse he allays by a compromise. He is fortunate enough to think of an adjournment by which the deed can be more completely and more vindictively carried out.

"Up, sword ; and know thou a more horrid hent :

that his soul may be as damn'd and black
As hell, whereto it goes."—(Act III, Sc. 3, 88-95.)

Thus, for the present, to his great mental relief, the impulse is quelled, and would, no doubt, had time and circumstance allowed, have ultimately passed away. But it was not to be. He had not yet recovered from the renewed attack, and the impulse was still upon him. We see the result in the next scene.

This scene is, perhaps, psychologically, the most important in the play in its bearing on Hamlet's mental state. We have here these two remaining signs of insanity showing themselves for the last time. After this they practically disappear. In the next two acts we hear no more of them. At the same time, we have the brilliant intellect and the nobility of character emerging out of the clouds of morbid sadness in which they had been temporarily obscured. The relics of the insane condition are seen in the renewed impulse to murder the King and the transient return of the old hallucination. The restoration of mental and moral sanity are shown in the powerful, conscientious, and soul-piercing, yet at the same time kind and

affectionate speech to his mother, and in the carefully reasoned words in which he proves to her his real sanity. The murderous impulse, revived by the sight of the King at his mercy, had been quelled for the time, but the mental disturbance it produced had not yet subsided, and the supposed sight of the King's form behind the arras, occurring so soon after the previous exciting motive, was like a red rag to a bull. Complete recovery, in face of two such potent factors, was, for the present, hopeless. This time he succumbed to his awakened impulse, and plunged his sword, in intent, through the King's body. The denouement was terrible. He had slain, instead, his dear, innocent, but short-sighted and garrulous old friend, the father of his beloved Ophelia. The shock would have shaken the reason of a saner man: its effect, supervening thus on the two previous disturbing factors, is seen in the re-appearance, only a few minutes later, of the old hallucination, the phantasm of his murdered father. This soon passes, but his grief remains:—

"heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me."
—(Act III, Sc. 4, 173, 174.)

QUEEN—"He weeps for what is done."—Act IV, Sc. 1, 27.)

Yet, in spite of all these powerful, and in some degree, successful, incitements towards a relapse, his will and reasoning powers remain in other respects firm and clear, and he carries out to the very letter, and with complete success, the task he had set himself, before these incitements had intervened, in his method of dealing with his mother. Of the effect of his reasoning and counsel there can be no doubt.

"O Hamlet! thou hast cleft my heart in twain."
—(Act III, Sc. 4, 156.)

The Queen's repentance, too, seems to have been genuine and permanent. In the next act we find her assisting Hamlet in his pretence of madness, repeating to the King, with a woman's cleverness, all those points in his behaviour during their recent interview which seemed to point to insanity, and carefully omitting all those which would have tended to explain them, to put another construction on the matter, and to show their deep underlying purpose. Meanwhile his intellect, never more than partially clouded, is becoming clearer and more active than ever. In his last speech to his mother he shows that he sees through and through his false friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and their crafty and treacherous conspiracy with the King against him.

"Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd."
—(Act III, Sc. 4, 203.)

He has already made up his mind, confident in his own mental superiority, to bring to naught all their machinations.

"For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petar : and 't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines,
And blow them at the moon."—(Ibid., 206-209.)

Object consciousness is certainly returning. Meanwhile, the obsession, though latent, remains, and is liable to assume a more active form from even trivial causes. The march through Denmark of a Norwegian Army bound for Poland on some unimportant expedition again revives, for a time, his impulse of revenge. The nature of this impulse has now, however, changed somewhat on account of changed surroundings. When it first came upon him he had absolutely no evidence of his uncle's guilt, except that of his own disordered imagination. This fact, at the time, his clouded faculties did not recognize. As they gradually cleared he saw the unsubstantial character of such evidence.

"I'll have grounds
More relative than this."—(Act II, Sc. 2, 632-633.)

But the grounds he sought were far from being in reality sound and convincing. The strange behaviour of a man at a play can hardly be considered even as circumstantial evidence in a case of murder, however much it might arouse suspicion. He *now* had "grounds more relative" in the words and bearing of his mother. He had openly charged her with complicity in his father's death, and had denounced King Claudius to her as the actual murderer in the plainest and strongest terms. Yet she makes not the slightest attempt to defend him from the accusation. To defend herself, at the moment, she might (even if innocent) have considered ill-timed, or perhaps unnecessary. But it is absolutely inconceivable that she should stand still and hear her own husband called a murderer without protest unless she had a certain knowledge that he was one, and that all Hamlet's statements were well-founded. She is crushed by the revelation that he knows all. Her only hope, roused by the momentary return of her son's delusion, is that he is insane, and knows not what he is saying:—

QUEEN—"O Hamlet, speak no more :
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul ;
And there I see such black and grainèd spots
As will not leave their tinct."—(Act III, Sc. 4, 88-91.)

And then, when the ghost has appeared:—

"This is the very coinage of your brain :
This bodily creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in."—(Ibid., 137-139.)

But in this she is soon undeceived, and her subsequent words can leave little doubt in his mind as to the substantial truth of his former suspicions. He has now certain tangible grounds to go upon, and although his determination is still in the nature of an obsession, and not yet fully justified; although his abstract right thus to constitute himself his father's avenger may be questioned, it is at least a matter for discussion on a basis of reason and morality. As a matter of fact, in spite of his vigorous declamation in the moment of excitement,* the obsession again leaves him, and does not reappear. For when, at the end of the play, the opportunity returns, the case is altered. The renewed impulse is no longer the result of mental aberration, but of sound reasoning on the event. The accumulated evidence of the King's guilt, and of his subsequent treacherous conspiracies against himself, to which he has now fallen a victim, have justified him, in view of future contingencies, in making use of this, his final, opportunity of putting a period to that hateful and dangerous career of crime.

From this scene (Act IV, Sc. 4) forward all signs of brain disorder have disappeared. A considerable time elapses before we again come in contact with Hamlet, and, when we do, his mind is sound and vigorous, he has recovered his power of action, and no signs of insanity remain. This result is entirely consistent with the usual course of the disease. In cases of melancholia the prognosis is, upon the whole, favourable. Especially is this the case in men of active and powerful minds, and possessed of self-control. Such men are able in some degree to limit the effect of impressions from without, and are also furnished with diverse channels of thought into which it is sometimes possible to transfer the intensity of mental action, and thus to favour the return of normal object consciousness. We are left in no doubt as to the greatness of Hamlet's intellectual powers. His was the "noble mind," the "courtier's, soldier's, scholar's": he was the "observed of all observers," while all his recorded words and deeds bear out the description. His self-control is, perhaps, best shown in his careful steering between two dangers in his interview with his mother, but also in restraining his impulse to murder the King (which he wrongly interpreted as weakness), and in his power to reason himself out of his suicidal tendencies. It is the fashion with a certain school of neurologists to attribute melancholia entirely to physical causes. That physical causes have their etiological importance there is no doubt, but it is futile to ignore mental causes altogether. Now

* "O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth."

—(Act IV, Sc. 4, 65, 66.)

that the effects of mental suggestion are being better understood, their influence must be obvious. There is always, no doubt, a certain physical receptivity, just as in the case of infection by pathogenic microbes. A perfectly healthy human being may be immune both to epidemics and to mental affections, but as microbes play an important part in one, so do strong mental impressions in the other. They are potent both in cause and cure.

In the present day, no doubt, Hamlet would have been subjected to somewhat different treatment. He might or might not have been sent to an asylum, but in any case he would have been carefully watched and treated, and an attempt would have been made by less violent methods to divert his thoughts into a more healthy channel, and at the same time to improve his physical condition. Violent methods, however, have their value, and sometimes even in the present day, though not deliberately chosen as curative agents, severe mental shocks or strains have restored to their normal condition patients suffering from certain forms of insanity.

Meanwhile, the general physical treatment of the case, though fortuitous and undesigned, was the best that could possibly have been pursued. Improvement in bodily health is always of the first importance in preparing the way for improvement in the mental condition, and of all methods of securing this end rest in the open air is the most efficacious. No better means could have been employed for attaining this end than the sea voyage which he was compelled to undertake. Rest in a small wooden vessel (ironclads were not invented) would be imperative, for there would be little room to move, and the pure and concentrated air of the sea-level would improve the circulation through the brain, and, by the freer access of oxygen tend to remove any morbid material from the blood. Under these surroundings the brain would be in the best condition to take a more healthy action, and receptive to saner mental suggestions either from within or from without. Such suggestions soon followed.

The mental treatment, which, like the bodily treatment, was entirely fortuitous and unintentional, consisted in a series of mental strains and shocks. These, by their very intensity, diverted the thoughts from their morbid bias, and, acting on the newly invigorated organ, drove them into a new and healthier channel, and thus restored to the mind its normal balance. The first of the series of mental strains is described in the first scene of the second act. Hamlet feels that he must devote all his energies to the task he has set himself—

“O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!”—(Act I, Sc. 5, 188, 189.)

But, then, what was to become of Ophelia, whom he loved intensely and who returned his love? The struggle is shown in Act II, where its effect on him is graphically described by Ophelia:—

“He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being.”—(Act II, Sc. 1, 94-96.)

This may have been either cause or effect. In any case, the return of the natural human affections, however painful, however violent the struggle to keep them in abeyance, indicated the beginning of a return to sanity. We have evidence of this later on in the same act, when he begins to doubt the evidence of his disordered imagination, and thinks out a method by which he can, with the help of the players, get some extraneous confirmation of his suspicions. This is further elucidated, as we have seen, in the next act, in his soliloquy, in his continued feigning of madness, in his management of the play-scene, and, especially in that wonderful concentration of the mental energies when he sets himself the Herculean task, which he carries out, of denouncing, yet tenderly sparing, his mother, and, by this combined method, leading her to repentance. His determination in a good intent is as great as, or greater than, it had *appeared* to be slight in a doubtful or unreasoned one.

All these violent mental processes had their effect in diverting the mind from its morbid tendency.

The actual special shocks were two in number, and they took place at the time best calculated to complete his recovery.

The first was when, after the interview with his mother, he was able fully to realize the fact that he had unintentionally murdered Ophelia's father, and the many terrible consequences which that fact entailed. The second was when he saw in black and white the damning evidence of the fact that his uncle had conspired, in a treacherous and cowardly manner, with the two false friends he had appointed as his companions, to destroy his life.

This final shock was effectual. He has no more hallucinations, no more morbid dwelling on his own condition and on the hatefulness of his environment, no longer any lack of judgment as to the value of evidence and how to act upon it, no more inconsequent obsessions, no more suicidal tendencies. His mental faculties are now concentrated on his own defence and the destruction of his known and proved enemies. His letters to Horatio and the King are perfectly sane; cautiously worded and well-suited to the case. We now come to the fifth and last act. This act shows Hamlet recovered from his morbid persistence of thought and all the symptoms which had followed in its train. He is now again capable of employing those great mental

powers which his obsessions had temporarily obscured. He is now again the abstract thinker, but not the abstract thinker only, for he is capable of turning his thought into immediate action when occasion requires. His thoughts, too, though abstract, are just and consequent. His tender reminiscences of Yorick, recalled by the accidental sight of his skull, and his consequent soliloquies on the vanity of earthly glory, tracing the inglorious destiny of the mortal bodies of men so famed in life and exercising so great an influence in the world, even, as Alexander and Julius Cæsar, though somewhat caviare to the utilitarian, are sound, just, and human. There is no flaw in his reasoning. The bathos is graphically described.

"Imperious Cæsar, dead, and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away."—(Act V, Sc. 1, 236, 237.)

Immediately upon this soliloquy follows the great and final shock. Nothing he had yet experienced approached this in suddenness and intensity. His uncle's crime, his mother's wickedness, the exciting causes of his mental disturbance, his enforced though voluntary repulse of Ophelia, his felonious though unintended homicide of her father, he had gone through. But misfortune still dogged his steps. He now learned for the first time that by these two acts, for which he was solely responsible, he had driven to self-destruction her whom he had loved with all the deep ardour of his powerful personality.

The funeral passes—he has no idea who is going to her grave—the death of Ophelia, like that of his father, had been hushed up for State reasons—he only sees, by the "maimed rites," that it is the funeral of a suicide.* Even the sight of Laertes conveys no idea to his mind. He calmly speaks of him to Horatio as "a very noble youth." It is not till Laertes mentions his "sister" that the terrible reality dawns upon him. He is stricken with remorse and grief. But he cannot quietly stand by and hear the brother's loud-sounding and somewhat ostentatious hyperboles of grief and love while he, the lover, looks on and makes no sign. He must put himself right with the world, and, in the face of Laertes's extravagances, he can only do so by meeting him on his own ground. His action shows strong passion and intense feeling, but it is that of a sane man, though the King and Queen, each for their own purposes, affect to consider him mad. He has no quarrel against Laertes. His struggle, like his words, was in self-defence. In his subsequent interview with Horatio he expresses his regret, as well as his sympathy with his misfortunes.

* It is by no means certain that Ophelia really committed suicide. The probability is rather the other way. But to Hamlet it was so. To him there was no question of a doubt.

In this scene, in which he relates his counter-plot against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he shows his resourcefulness and determination. He has successfully disposed of these false, treacherous friends, the willing agents and tools of a greater intellect, who were carrying him to his destruction. They are hardly worth his consideration. Not only had he to defend himself, but they were obstacles in his path, obstacles in his now settled purpose; they had not wisdom enough for successful knavery, and if they were so foolish as to put their feeble selves between two great opposing forces—

“’Tis dangerous, when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensèd points
Of mighty opposites.”—(Act V, Sc. 2, 60-62.)

The ethical justification of Hamlet's proceedings is not now the question before us. This may constitute material for endless casuistical dissertations. Of their *sanity* there can be no doubt. There is no “obsession” now. His course is clear. The evidence is all before him. Claudius has murdered his father, corrupted his mother, and treacherously plotted against his life. He is determined that even-handed human justice shall overtake him. He has removed the chief obstacles, and nothing will now prevent him from carrying out his purpose. Neither doubt, conscience nor indecision now stand in his way. Doubt is removed, conscience is on his side, and indecision no longer finds a place in his improved mental condition.

“is’t not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm? and is’t not to be damn’d,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?”—(Act V, Sc. 2, 67-70.)

Further evidence of his mental soundness is seen in the versatility displayed in his bantering conversation with Osric, and in his noble and generous speech on again meeting with Laertes. The climax is no doubt precipitated by the mortal wound he receives in the duel, and the knowledge that he has but a few minutes to live. Nevertheless, the deed is done, and Laertes himself bears witness to its justice. He conjures Horatio, who alone can do so, to justify and honour his career.

“Report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.”—(Act V, Sc. 2, 350, 351.)

“O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.”—(Act V, Sc. 2, 355-360.)

This is not the language of insanity, but of sound and sober reasoning.

SALERNO: THE EARLIEST MEDICAL SCHOOL.

SALERNO, with the neighbouring Benedictine Monastery of Monte Cassino, was the earliest medical school in Christian Europe. Situated in a bay of its own, just to the south of the famous Bay of Naples, the city was in ancient times a Roman colony. After many vicissitudes it passed into the hands of the Lombards, in whose possession it remained until, about the middle of the eleventh century, it was besieged by the Normans under Robert Guiscard, who added it, in 1075, to his Dukedom of Apulia.

In the meanwhile, the monastery of Monte Cassino had been founded by St. Benedict himself in 528. Here the Saint spent the rest of his days as abbot, and drew up the rules of his Order. In 543 he died, and was buried in the monastery. As is well known, the principles of the Benedictine Order, at least as they were laid down by its founder, were very enlightened. In addition to their ordinary religious observances, the monks were encouraged to study letters and science, and for this purpose to call in to their aid, by the attraction of liberal salaries, the most learned men of the time. These injunctions were obeyed faithfully, the result being that a great impetus was given to learning in Europe. Among the subjects specially taught was medicine, which the monks studied in the writings of the Arabs.

At the beginning of the twelfth century the authors of a certain famous poem called "*Regimen Sanitatis Salerni*" were modest enough to describe themselves as professors of "The School of Salerno." But gradually, with increasing favour from kings and even emperors, the school grew to be a regular university. Ruggiero, King of Sicily, passed a law in the year 1137, or thereabouts, enacting that anyone who desired to practise physic must be examined and approved by his officials and judges, under a penalty of confiscation of his goods. The term "officials" is supposed to have meant the physicians or professors of the school, for the Sovereign had granted peculiar privileges to the city. Another benefactor arrived about a century later in the person of the Emperor Frederic II. This enlightened Monarch also established the University of Naples, and in 1231 published edicts relating to the two neighbouring foundations.

The curriculum drawn up by these enactments is interesting as being probably the earliest regulation of the kind in the Middle Ages.



