

Mark Antony : a comparative study in sub-hypnotic control, dominance or ascendency, and some of its causal factors / by J. Foster Palmer.

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THE MERCHANT OF
BORDER

By J.

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 Vol. XXI—No. 6



THE MERCHANT OF VENICE: A SHORT STUDY IN BORDERLAND MELANCHOLY.

By J. FOSTER PALMER.

"SOME men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." The same may be said of sadness. Some, if not actually born sad, go through the greater part of their lives with an almost complete lack of what are called, perhaps rightly called, "animal spirits,"* who look habitually on the black side of things. It is their normal condition. As some men and women have a normal temperature of 97 degrees, so others have a similar defect in that particular form of nerve action, whatever it may be, which produces the joy of life and the vivid appreciation of its surroundings. With some, as we have said, this condition is normal. It is a part, and an unfortunate part, of their physiological make-up, and, be their external conditions what they may, never entirely leaves them. Some, on the other hand, have, by their own act, so exhausted their store of nervous energy that they permanently cease to have the active vital power necessary for the enjoyment of existence: while some, through no fault of their own, are brought to such a condition by a series of untoward circumstances. Such cases, however, are usually temporary, and improve when the external conditions alter. In other words, "some are born sad, some acquire sadness, and some have sadness forced upon them." Which of these is the condition of the Merchant of Venice? The opening scene of the play presents him at once in a state of great gloom and deep depression of spirits, the cause of which he himself is quite unable to trace. It is not quite clear whether this depression is a chronic condition, or only a temporary one of more or less recent growth. The attempt to trace the cause, and the suggestion

* Professor Leonard Hill, the well-known physiologist, uses this expression, which, formerly so prevalent, had become obsolete, in a literal sense. He applies it, I believe, to the central portion, or axis-cylinder, of the nerve, which he believes to be in a fluid state in the living subject. The word seems to be practically synonymous with the more prevalent term "nerve impulse."

of having "caught it," "found it," or "come by it," give the idea of a recent acquisition. On the other hand, the resigned hopelessness of

" . . . every man must play his part,
And mine a sad one."—(Act I, Sc. 1, 78, 79.)

almost suggests a lifelong burden. In either case, Antonio's condition is one of pure depression, entirely devoid of confusion of thought, loss of memory, or slowness of idealism. The intellectual equipment is complete, and ready for action when such action is needed. Indeed, in such cases it is the necessity for action which diverts the train of thought, counteracts the morbid element, and makes life worth living. The case, however, is essentially distinct from that of Jaques in "As You Like It," who seems to revel in the outcome of his melancholy, the cause of which is abundantly clear, whose capacity for rational enjoyment is worn out, and whose existence only becomes endurable when he is relieving his *ennui* by attacking the imaginary sins and shortcomings of his fellow-men, and who is constantly on the look-out for some new and morbid stimulus to rouse his jaded mental powers. This is a case of purely physiological melancholy, the result of well-defined causes, and taking the form of pessimism with regard to others rather than to himself.

On the other hand, the mental condition of Antonio is not, like that of Hamlet, one of distinct melancholia. That it might not have become so under different surroundings is not so certain. From the beginning of the play he is beset by a deep depression of spirits, which, although it has the appearance of a merely relative condition, an exaggeration, in fact, of the ordinary ups and downs of mental equilibrium—that is, of melancholy as a phase of this normal state rather than of melancholia as a mental disease—has this in common with the latter, that it appears to be independent of any mental cause—

"I know not *why* I am so sad ;

. . . how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn."—(Act I, Sc. 1, 1-5.)

There is nothing to cause this depression, and this suggests that it must result from some physical defect or disturbance, though probably only functional, and *perhaps* temporary. The causes suggested by Salanio and Salarino, he tells them emphatically, do not exist. And possibly this fact may give some clue to the real cause, so far, at least, as it was mental. He had nothing left to wish for. Hope had left Pandora's box. And hope as truly leaves us when all our desires are fulfilled as, when repeatedly deferred, she "maketh the heart sick." R. L. Stevenson, in his essay on "El Dorado," says

"an aspiration is a joy for ever. It is in virtue of his own desires and curiosities that any man continues to exist with even patience." "To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is labour." This success, for the present, Antonio lacked. His ventures had all been successful, and he had the greatest confidence that they would continue to be so. Too great confidence, in fact; for he had begun to cease to take any interest in life. The terrible demon of "*ennui*" had taken hold upon him, and this was certainly one of the factors which led to his state of mental depression. Had Antonio's mind been set on something nobler than the mere acquisition of wealth, this factor, at least, would have been wanting. If his prime object in life had been to work out some difficult problem in ethics or science, or to choose suitable careers for a large family of sons, *ennui* would have found no place in the active brain, "and melancholy" would not have "marked him for its own." A higher aspiration, a less attainable ambition, would have hindered its growth.

Doubtless, as already observed, there were physical causes as well, but these mental and physical deviations from the normal state act and re-act on one another, and so, to use a somewhat hackneyed pathological phrase, "the vicious circle is maintained." No one, at this period, *i.e.*, the first act of the play, could speak of Antonio as insane. He is in a state of undue depression, of simple, perhaps physiological, melancholy, but not of insanity. He has no delusions, no obsessions, and, apparently, no loss of object consciousness. A severe shock, a sudden necessity for intense active brain-work, would, even now, counteract the evil mental influences, and restore the cerebral blood-current to its normal channels. In due course the shock came, and the result followed. On the other hand, if the mental and physical causes which had brought about this condition had been allowed to continue their influence undisturbed, it is quite conceivable that the "mental weariness" referred to in the second line of the play might have evolved, in time, a tendency to suicide. For, after all, there is no absolute line of demarcation between sanity and insanity, and much ingenuity has been expended in the discovery of a scientific barrier which is non-existent.

The condition so often seen of acquired chronic melancholy, accompanied by pessimistic views of human nature, is, in many, if not most, cases, the result of a life of dissipation. The nerve centres of potential happiness* are exhausted by selfish indulgence, and, the

* This, of course, is a figure of speech. There are no "nerve centres of potential happiness" in a literal sense. Happiness is, presumably, the result of a moderate and healthy activity of the nerve cells. When the energy latent in the nerve centres is exhausted by excessive action, the "animal spirits" become sluggish in their action, and depression naturally follows.

mental balance being thus disturbed, nothing is left to the worn-out debauchee but the one-sided view that "all is vanity." Such was Jaques in "As You Like It." "All the embossed sores and headed evils, That he with license of freefoot had caught, He would disgorge into the general world" by way of reforming it. His distorted vision could see no good. There was nothing of this in Antonio. What pessimism he had was limited. He did not like Jews. But he was a true, faithful, and loving friend, and his widespread kindness and warm-hearted generosity had covered in him a multitude of sins. For Antonio, after all, was not a saint. His treatment of Shylock was hardly that of an ideal Christian.

"Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last,
You spurned me such a day; another time
You called me dog."—(Act I, Sc. 3, 127-129.)

These cruel insults Antonio not only does not deny, but threatens to repeat. At this point, however, his love for Bassanio exorcises the evil demon of hatred and contempt, and he becomes almost friendly with the Jew for his friend's sake.

Gratiano probably struck the right note as to the initial cause of the mental state. It was not the present anxiety about the safety of his ships that was telling upon him as Salarino and Salanio had suggested. It was the after-effect, the mental exhaustion of the deep and far-reaching schemes and plans for amassing wealth that was answerable for the mental depression he was now suffering from.*

"You have too much respect upon the world:
They lose it, that do buy it with much care."—(Act I, Sc. 1, 74, 75.)

"What doth it profit a man, to gain the whole world, and forfeit his life?" ($\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$).† Antonio had exhausted the reserve energy of his nerve centres, not, probably, in dissipation as ordinarily understood, but in the dissipating effect of excitement in the keen struggle and race for wealth, a process probably quite as exhausting. Indeed, it has been said by a well-known authority on psychological matters that there is nothing in the world which causes so much mental and

* We need not hastily conclude, as some have done, that because "he lent out money gratis," Antonio was lacking in business capacity. His caution in the distribution of his investments, their extent, absorbing practically the whole of his fortune, and the ultimate success of his ventures, point to a precisely opposite conclusion. Money-lending as a means of obtaining wealth he disdained. It was less interesting and less profitable than his own, while his generous nature and his hatred of the Hebrew race combined led him to befriend the needy and injure the Jew at the same time.

† $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ = the soul, the seat of understanding, the mind, the talents, or the genius. The word has all these meanings in the classic writers.

moral deterioration as the greed of gain.* Indeed, "the love of money," as S. Paul says (not money itself, as Horace foolishly remarks†), is truly "the root of all evils" (πάντων τῶν κακῶν). I believe that, in actual fact, the life of a millionaire is usually by no means a happy one. I cannot speak from personal experience, but I think we see and hear enough to convince us that this is the case. The constant anxiety inseparable from large holdings gets on their nerves, and even suicide is not unknown, or even uncommon, among them. Those who have read "The African Millionaire," by Grant Allen, will not wish to follow in his steps. This, of course, is an exaggerated account, and describes a man who had only one idea in life, an idea which had driven out every better thought and feeling. But there are also men (and the type is surely a more natural one) who have retained certain saving qualities, whose minds have still a place for generous impulses, and whose souls are not entirely eaten up with the gold craze. Such a one was Antonio. With all his speculations, with all his anxiety to increase his wealth, with all his anti-Semitic pride and contempt, he had retained unscathed some of the primal virtues. He had never ceased, it seems, to relieve the necessities of those who were in need, or, as Shylock calls it, to "lend out money gratis," while his tender love for Bassanio, for whom he sacrificed so much, places him on a far higher plane than the mere self-seeking money grubber whose whole soul is in his possessions, and keeps him human.

"A kinder gentleman treads not the earth.
I saw Bassanio and Antonio part :
Bassanio told him, he would make some speed
Of his return ; he answered—' Do not so,
Slubber not business for my sake, Bassanio,
But stay the very riping of the time ;
And for the Jew's bond, which he hath of me,
Let it not enter in your mind of love :
Be merry ; and employ your chiefest thoughts
To courtship, and such fair ostents of love
As shall conveniently become you there :'
And even there, his eye being big with tears,
Turning his face, he put his hand behind him,
And with affection wondrous sensible
He wrung Bassanio's hand, and so they parted."
"I think he only loves the world for him."—(Act II, Sc. 8, 35-50.)

This "affection wondrous sensible," which reminds us of the love of David and Jonathan, was his salvation. In other words, without

* Maudsley.

† Book III, Ode 16. "Divitias malorum omnium fontem esse."

entering into metaphysical questions, it mitigated the severity, and ultimately brought about the cure, of his melancholy. His emotional intensity was, to use a somewhat mixed metaphor, the saving clause in his mental equipment. But for this, the great crisis in his life might not have taken place, and his condition have gone on from bad to worse. The intense peril, nay, the apparent certainty of instant death, which he had to face, drove away all minor sources of depression, and the rebound caused by his sudden and unexpected escape brought him a zest of life he had never before experienced; and when, with Bassanio, he went to Belmont, he went, not a sadder and a wiser, but a wiser and a happier man.

In the case of Hamlet it was a suddenly-aroused mental energy, in that of Antonio a suddenly-aroused emotional activity, which formed the most prominent factor in restoring the normal current of thought. Is not mental suggestion, when rightly applied, an attempt to imitate what is in these cases a natural process by diverting thought into another channel? If so, it would seem that suggestion should always have a positive rather than a negative object in view; that is to say, should insist, not on the cessation of certain symptoms or tendencies of mental action, but on the pursuit of new and definite trains of thought with which such symptoms and such tendencies are incompatible.



