

SOME VERSIFIED ASPECTS OF HOSPITAL LIFE.

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These two collections of verse—one of them, new, by an American physician familiar to many of us professionally but hitherto unknown as a poet; the other, forty years old and almost too well known to call for more than congratulations on its appearance in a fifteenth edition—contemplate the psychology and pathology of human suffering from widely divergent viewpoints.

Henley, an English essayist, newspaper writer, literary man of the world, not altogether unrecalled because of a certain episode connected with a merchandizable dossier of the literary remains of Robert Louis Stevenson, spends some months of enforced idleness in an Edinburgh hospital, catches a few of its angles and flashes them back to the reader in verses as coldly brilliant as the sun's reflection on the surface of the moon. Good copy, produced by a writer of *vers de société* temporarily out of his element, rarely anything more. And yet it must be admitted, to justify Henley's continuing popularity, that as a versifier he is a master, and as an observer of surfaces the modern war correspondent can teach him nothing. It is the newspaper man's function to record impressions, not to expound psychology. Here are a few of these impressions; note the accuracy of his reportorial instinct—no question as to whether he is recording genuine experiences, they are every man's who has to go through them. And the verse—as smooth as Austin Dobson, even when unrhymed.

BEFORE

Behold me waiting—waiting for the knife.
A little while, and at a leap I storm
The thick, sweet mystery of chloroform,
The drunken dark, the little death-in-life.
The gods are good to me: I have no wife,
No innocent child, to think of as I near
The fateful minute; nothing all-too dear
Unmans me for my bout of passive strife.
Yet I am tremulous and a trifle sick,
And, face to face with chance, I shrink a little:
My hopes are strong, my will is something weak.
Here comes the basket? Thank you. I am ready.
But, gentlemen, my porters, life is brittle:
You carry Caesar and his fortunes—steady!

OPERATION

You are carried in a basket,
Like a carcase from the shambles,

¹ *Warp and Woof*, by L. Pierce Clark, M. D., Hillacre Bookhouse, Riverside, Conn., 1913.

² *Poems, In the Hospital*, by W. E. Henley, 15th ed., 1915, Scribners, N. Y.

To the theatre, a cockpit
Where they stretch you on a table.

Then they bid you close your eyelids,
And they mask you with a napkin,
And the anaesthetic reaches
Hot and subtle through your being.

And you gasp and reel and shudder
In a rushing, swaying rapture,
While the voices at your elbow
Fade—receding—fainter—farther.

Lights about you shower and tumble,
And your blood seems crystallizing—
Edged and vibrant, yet within you
Racked and hurried back and forward.

Then the lights grow fast and furious,
And you hear a noise of waters,
And you wrestle, blind and dizzy,
In an agony of effort,

Till a sudden lull accepts you,
And you sound an utter darkness...
And awaken...with a struggle...
On a hushed, attentive audience.

AFTER

Like as a flamelet blanketed in smoke,
So through the anaesthetic shows my life;
So flashes and so fades my thought, at strife
With the strong stupor that I heave and choke
And sicken at, it is so foully sweet.
Faces look strange from space—and disappear
Far voices, sudden loud, offend my ear—
And hush as sudden. Then my senses fleet:
All were a blank, save for this dull, new pain
That grinds my leg and foot; and brokenly
Time and the place glimpse on to me again;
And, unsurprised, out of uncertainty,
I wake—relapsing—somewhat faint and fain,
To an immense, complacent dreamery.

NOCTURN

At the barren heart of midnight,
When the shadow shuts and opens
As the loud flames pulse and flutter,
I can hear a cistern leaking.

Dripping, dropping, in a rhythm,
Rough, unequal, half-melodious,
Like the measures aped from nature
In the infancy of music.

Like the buzzing of an insect,
Still, irrational, persistent...
I must listen, listen, listen,
In a passion of attention;
Till it taps upon my heartstrings,
And my very life goes dripping
Dropping, dripping, drip-drip-dropping,
In the drip-drop of the cistern.

DISCHARGED

Carry me out
Into the wind and the sunshine,
Into the beautiful world.

O, the wonder, the spell of the streets!
The stature and strength of the horses,
The rustle and echo of footfalls,
The flat roar and rattle of wheels!
A swift tram floats huge on us...
It's a dream?
The smell of the mud in my nostrils
Blows brave—like a breath of the sea!

As of old,
Ambulant, undulant drapery,
Vaguely and strangely provocative,
Flutters and beckons. O, yonder—
Is it?—the gleam of a stocking!
Sudden, a spire
Wedged in the mist! O, the houses,
The long lines of lofty, grey houses,
Cross-hatched with shadow and light!
These are the streets....
Each is an avenue leading
Whither I will!

Free....!
Dizzy, hysterical, faint,
I sit, and the carriage rolls on with me
Into the wonderful world.

All of Henley's more serious verses, of which those just quoted are fair samples, display just enough of a superficial sort of psychology to interest even the medical reader—but they are photographic records of mental impressions rather than of thoughts themselves. They represent accurately enough the transactions of a second-rate soul under conditions of stress. One scrutinizes them in vain for any psychology beyond a certain peevish attitude of mind.

Here, in sonnet form, are a few lighter "album leaves"—no, they are really too good for that, better call them cameos—and fine ones. Any one

who has ever "walked the hospitals" can recognize these types; for my own part I most certainly am personally acquainted with "The Scrubber," and any Chicago surgeon will identify "The Visitor" as the fairy godmother—God bless her—of a certain south side surgical ward. One might wish, however, that the dignity and preoccupation pictured in the feminine personalities analyzed so brilliantly in the last three sonnets were more frequently met with in American hospitals.

This time the reporter is convalescent, puts aside self-contemplation, looks out on his narrow hospital horizon humorously, quizzically, accurately, but always superficially and temporarily as might be expected of a man who has but just come from the world and who intends to return there as soon as his leg will let him. The verse is that of a literary epicure, graceful, delicately flavored, exquisite, and never metrically out of tune.

"THE CHIEF"

His brow spreads large and placid, and his eye
Is deep and bright, with steady looks that still.
Soft lines of tranquil thought his face fulfill—
His face at once benign and proud and shy.
If envy scout, if ignorance deny,
His faultless patience, his unyielding will,
Beautiful gentleness and splendid skill,
Innumerable gratitudes reply.
His wise, rare smile is sweet with certainties,
And seems in all his patients to compel
Such love and faith as failure cannot quell;
We hold him for another Herakles,
Battling with custom, prejudice, disease,
As once the son of Zeus with Death and Hell.

VISITOR

Her little face is like a walnut shell
With wrinkling lines; her soft, white hair adorns
Her withered brows in quaint, straight curls like horns;
And all about her clings an old, sweet smell.
Prim is her gown and Quakerlike her shawl.
Well might her bonnets have been born on her.
Can you conceive a Fairy Godmother
The subject of a strong religious call?
In snow or shine, from bed to bed she runs,
All twinkling smiles and texts and pious tales,
Her mittened hands, that ever give or pray,
Bearing a sheaf of tracts, a bag of buns;
A wee old maid that sweeps the Bridegroom's way,
Strong in a cheerful trust that never fails.

SCRUBBER

She's tall and gaunt, and in her hard, sad face
With flashes of the old fun's animation

There lowers the fixed and peevish resignation
Bred of a past where troubles came apace.
She tells me that her husband, ere he died,
Saw seven of their children pass away,
And never knew the little lass at play
Out on the green, in whom he's deified.
Her kin dispersed, her friends forgot and gone,
All simple faith her honest Irish mind,
Scolding her spoiled young saint, she labors on:
Telling her dreams, taking her patients' part,
Trailing her coat sometimes; and you shall find
No rougher, quainter speech, nor kinder heart.

HOUSE-SURGEON

Exceeding tall, but built so well his height
Half-disappears in flow of chest and limb;
Moustache and whisker trooper-like in trim;
Frank-faced, frank-eyed, frank-hearted, always bright
And always punctual—morning, noon, and night;
Bland as a Jesuit, sober as a hymn;
Humorous, and yet without a touch of whim;
Gentle and amiable, yet full of fight.
His piety, though fresh and true in strain,
Has not yet whitewashed up his common mood
To the dead blank of his particular Schism.
Sweet, unaggressive, tolerant, most humane,
Wild artists like his kindly elderhood,
And cultivate his mild Philistinism.

STAFF-NURSE: OLD STYLE

The greater masters of the commonplace,
REMBRANDT and good SIR WALTER—only these
Could paint her all to you; experienced ease
And antique liveliness and ponderous grace;
The sweet old roses of her sunken face;
The depth and malice of her sly, grey eyes;
The broad Scots tongue that flatters, scolds, defies;
The thick Scots wit that fells you like a mace.
These thirty years has she been nursing here,
Some of them under SYME, her hero still.
Much is she worth, and even more is made of her.
Patients and students hold her very dear.
The doctors love her, tease her, use her skill.
They say "The Chief" himself is half-afraid of her.

STAFF-NURSE: NEW STYLE

Blue-eyed and bright of face but waning fast
Into the sere of virginal decay,
I view her as she enters, day by day,
As a sweet sunset almost overpast.
Kindly and calm, patrician to the last,

Superbly falls her gown of sober gray,
 And on her chignon's elegant array
 The plainest cap is somehow touched with caste.
 She talks BEETHOVEN; frowns disapprobation
 At BALZAC'S name, sighs it at 'poor GEORGE SANDS'S';
 Knows that she has exceeding pretty hands;
 Speaks Latin with a right accentuation;
 And gives at need (as one who understands)
 Draught, counsel, diagnosis, exhortation.

LADY-PROBATIONER

- Some three, or five, or seven, and thirty years;
 A Roman nose; a dimpling double-chin;
 Dark eyes and shy that, ignorant of sin,
 Are yet acquainted, it would seem, with tears;
 A comely shape; a slim, high-colored hand,
 Graced, rather oddly with a signet ring;
 A bashful air, becoming everything;
 A well-bred silence always at command.
 Her plain print gown, prim cap, and bright steel chain
 Look out of place on her, and I remain
 Absorbed in her, as in a pleasant mystery.
 Quick, skilful, quiet, soft in speech and touch...
 "Do you like nursing?" "Yes, sir, very much."
 Somehow, I rather think she has a history.
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Dr. Clark's poetry displays to the reader none of the lighter side of professional experience. For the very good reason that the phases of hospital existence pictured in the doctor's verse have no lighter aspects in which they may be displayed. He writes out of the fullness of many years' contemplation of the drab life within the confines of psychopathic wards and epileptic colonies—how sardonic the humorist who could extract real laughter from such sources! Minor chords, somber motives echo through these verses—all of them; hopeless as Tschaikevsky's sixth symphony, and sometimes as intentionally discordant and chaotic.

Short though these poems are, and all too few, each is a picture painted with wonderful familiarity with the individuality of mental disorder, conceived from the standpoint of the morbid ego looking out upon the world through the remnant of its intellect. Paranoia, dementia praecox, paresis, status epilepticus, idiocy—the essence of the crippled soul of each lies bare in all its tragic nakedness.

It would be too much to ask that such pictures should come to us in rhythmically rounded verses—how could graceful poetry convey any true conception of these distorted mentalities? The wonder is that the concept

can be projected over to us at all—that any mind could observe so keenly and still feel so sympathetically as to voluntarily evolve and impersonate a portrait gallery of psychopathic states, and yet remain normal enough to emit them clothed in intelligent metrical form.

Poetry of this deeply psychological character has a certain parallelism with much of our modern music and should hardly be measured by past standards of meter or mechanism. We have come to believe that if the conception is correct, and if it is set forth in language adequate to stir the imagination to a point where it visualizes the essence of the tragedy, the true function of poetry is achieved irrespective of apparent imperfections in the medium of transmission.

Dr. Clark's poetry will hardly appeal to the casual reader; the verse is too rugged, its color is too somber, and its cry is wrung from too far within the depths of the experiences of a sympathetic psycho-analyst. And yet to the medical reader who would see epitomized certain morbid "states" of the human intellect we commend a thoughtful study of the following fragments:

AN EPILEPTIC CRISIS.

Discordant clangor strikes the fearing heart,
Whose warning nerves send quiv'ring message home;
Hell's fury bursts, it leaps the prostrate form,
The senses fade and drift the night-tide lone.

STATUS EPILEPTICUS

I know not why God burdens so!
Convulsed with pain
And bathed in stup'rous death,
Contending hells possess my prostrate form;
My muscles knot,
The blood stands still;
The breath not less than spirit filled with woe.
I live, I die,
And nights enslave my soul.
Ah, God, why burden so!
Yet slay entire
And rend the body quite,
But let my spirit go!
The awful pain, the black night-tide,
Unconsciousness—
I hope no gift from heaven nor hell,
I only ask for rest, by some great boulder rock, unmoved,
Forgotten if thou wilt!

SYMPATHY

To those who pass their scrolled lives before my eyes,
To those who let their awful fears and dreams arise,

To vex, to haunt and pain and grieve their day again:
 I bid you know my soul ne'er lies in sheltered place,
 Unmindful of your piteous plea for aid and grace;
 Your conflict's mine, even its hell and all its stain.

MELANCHOLIA

Some blast of hell or hate has blown across my soul,
 And lo, that which I builded well in yester sun
 Has shrunk within these hands, so very small, it seems
 I am a nameless, homeless, wandering wretch, undone.

I, like some luckless beggar ever strive to pawn
 That which were gold, in days o'er-passed; alas, I find
 It worthless, even faith has lost its minting coin,—
 Beyond redemption's goal I'm beaten by the wind.

In some far land of sun the joyous speak me fair
 Of sweetest flowers that grow beneath the bluest skies,—
 All now so pains my mind, such awful dreads arise
 Lest I shall sudden come upon these joys, and die.

INTRAMURAL

They delved and weighed my mind for days on end,
 They found odd jots of dreams like twisted bars of steel,
 They sought therein by simple quest to spell my soul,
 And strove to find the thing they could not feel.

"'Tis strange," they said, "his rhythm of life is broke,
 For now he sits all day so listless, sad and calm.
 We'll bind his wounds anew, soon mend his broken soul,
 With food and shelter, these shall be our balm."

O, God, make thou these purblind souls to see
 That shielding walls ne'er ope the heart, nor set it free,—
 Much less the mind; my need is earth and sea,
 A bit of sun, a taste of Life's immensity.

PARESIS (Last Stage)

The battle's lost; the dread destroyer enters in,—
 Unhingeing gates, uptaking old foundation stones;
 It saps the secret stores of mind and soul within.
 To mocking jest the vanquished host replies in tones
 That spell delusions mad, of grandeur false and thin.
 Instead, the vandal builds a tinsel temple there,
 Each passing fancy shapes anew its gaudy form;
 Stupendous pile, o'erlaid with brilliants, blazing, rare.
 Tho' lorded host mere hovel has to keep him warm
 He bids us enter in and tread his golden stair.
 This tragic drama ends; as dusk presages night
 So fades away this stuff of dreams, in mind diseased;

The grandest fabrics fade, are lost from memory quite;
If fatuous lord within his ruins sad, is teased,
He solely cries, "An entrance, gold!" and then—the night.

GOD'S FOOL

With eyes transfixed in vacant stare,
Throughout the day he waits and delves,
And hopes as best he may, somewhere,
To find the God that in him dwells.
His quest may end, that God is Fate,
And thus his aged-childish soul
Shall seek in vain. Why then await
The bondage here, without a goal?

THE PARANOIAC

Too clearly hath he seen the end that may not be,
Too keenly hath he loved the thing he may not have;
Through this a Nessus shirt of madness cloaks him in,
Whose self destroying fire is fed by child desire.
No refuge may he make nor lesser love partake;
'Tis all transmuted now in rancorous bitter hate,—
Such hate that's only born of love, a wish debarred,—
From which he shapes a shield and sword which he may wield.
To him 'tis life and hate, or love and death, a fate
Which we do greatly sin to try to force apart.
To cast such armor off, though it to you and me
So ill conditioned seem, so like unto a dream.