

## CHAP. IV.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF DEMENTIA.

IF a methodical account of Dementia, wherein the lesion of each mental and bodily organ were described in order, could be written, a learner would, after much toil, reap an ill notion. So different from Mania, so complex and so irregular are its symptoms, that in relating them it is well to profess no order, but to use silently that which will best impress its character.

The word *démence*, in French, *dementia* in Latin, and *fatuity* in English, have been used in far too wide a sense. Pinel defined Dementia, "abolition of thought;" Esquirol spoke more distinctively of it, characterising it as weakening of "perception, understanding, and will;"\* and says, elsewhere, that the *disorder* of

\* Esquirol, *Maladies Mentales*, vol. ii. p. 219.

the ideas, affections, and will, is characterised by weakness, by loss, more or less complete, of the perceptive and intellectual faculties, and of the will.\*

Dr. Prichard expands this last more copious definition into the following fourfold arrangement, each stage of the disorder characterised by the loss of some important mental faculty. In the first, the Understanding is little impaired, though the Memory is injured. In the second, the Reasoning powers generally have undergone morbid change. The third betokens absence in the power of simple Apprehension; and with the fourth the Animal instincts and appetencies are fled. And to this I am bound to add a remarkable phenomenon, of which I have seen one example: a man who, to use the expression of a friend with whom he lives, is an hibernating animal; he never speaks for nine months, but sits quietly and contentedly, having apparently no discomforts: for three months he thaws, and then, though certainly not wise above other men, is agreeable and good-natured. A case not much dissimilar is related by Dr. Prichard.†

\* Esquirol, *Maladies Mentales*, vol. ii. p. 232.

† Prichard on *Insanity*, p. 239. 1842.

Be these divisions as they may, it has been truly said, that the varieties and complications of Dementia\* render it more difficult to define than the forms of insanity to which Pathognomonic symptoms may be assigned. Esquirol finds it necessary to offer the following genera and sub-genera: namely, Simple, and Complicated Dementia. The first, comprising Acute, Chronic, Senile, and Intermittent; the second, Monomaniacal, Maniacal, Convulsive, and Epileptic. The account of Esquirol, and the definition of Pinel, are excellent:—When we have added the remark, that as Mania is intellectual lesion by excess, so Dementia is intellectual lesion by default, or ideas in plus and minus quantities respectively, little more need be said by way of general explanation, save only to enter the caution, that Dementia is neither idiocy nor imbecility; the former being arrest in the mental development (?), and material structures thereto belonging, in the foetal state; the latter, subsequent arrest of the intellectual faculties from accident, sickness, bad education, no education, organic, or unknown causes.

Mania frequently precedes Dementia, but not

\* Marc; De la Folie, dans ses Rapports, ch. vii. &c.

necessarily; sudden fright, mental “shocks,” are not infrequent causes. Suppression of natural secretions and excretions; other forms of insanity, some diseases, age, vice, sorrow, disappointed love, precede and produce it. The causes, both mental and physical, are here arranged in about the order of their frequency.

Since the power of attention is diminished, memory and judgment are necessarily impaired; thoughts and ideas are no longer formed; and there is a partial or total wreck of the whole spiritual man.

Unable to comprehend, he that is demented yet lends his ear, hangs upon the words uttered, and cannot comprise, in his enfeebled grasp, words that shall make the briefest sentence; he begins an answer to that he had not understood, and ideas failing, he looks him down and laughs, half-sensible of the weakness and sorrow that have stricken him.

And with such a failure of the understanding the passions and the will become powerless also. Since apprehension and memory are so faded, with him the benevolent affections have no impulsive existence. His malevolent desires, if they yet remain, are too transient for revenge:

for resentment he is too impotent. If his spirit rise, and a storm gather, a kind hand may dispel it; for he is led whithersoever another will. Passiveness is comfort to him, and to be disturbed in that, is his torment. Toys and shining bodies delight, and his own senseless noises occupy him.

I speak of him who is truly and hopelessly demented: for, as we have said above, there are various stages of the malady, though they partake more or less of the type here described.

As to moral faculty in this fallen state, it is not wholly defaced; they are frequently aware when they have done wrong, though they cannot exert themselves to do right.

Sensation is weakened; but the motor nerves are frequently in a state of irritability. To be deaf and dumb is sometimes superadded; and general paralysis, with inevitable death, follows. Some will sing incoherent words, and upon one note, the whole day long; others murmur, ever babbling sounds; while a few write upon the ground. All that is done, is done listlessly. The sense of heat is very variable. Some suffer injury, not avoiding it, and will play with hot coals; but more derive comfort and pleasure

from moderate warmth. The sphincter muscles are not relaxed, but most are nevertheless dirty, and some grossly obscene. The Catamenia are frequently irregular or suppressed, and when maniacal paroxysms accompany the demented female, they probably supervene at the menstrual period.

The temperament of the demented being generally lymphatic, (phlegmatic,) they are often to be recognised by obesity, by a pallid, and "muddy" countenance, or that which is observed in some sufferers under "Bright's disease."

All is characteristic of degeneration, bodily and mental; and the animal functions seem as though they had lingered on beyond their appointed period. "The keeper of the house hath trembled, and the strong man hath bowed himself." "The silver cord is loosed, the golden bowl is broken. The pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel is broken at the cistern."

