

SONNETOMANIA.

THROUGHOUT the region of specifics I have long sought for a cure or antidote against one prevalent disorder. In "Every man his own doctor,"—in the puff-struck windows of patent medicines—on the gay magazine-cover, and in the shy corner of a newspaper, not forgetting the bills so inopportunistically presented gratis to the step-picking passenger, I have searched; but all in vain. Genuine pills and universal panaceas bid defiance (if duly attested and signed) to all diseases save the present; the precious infusion of youth from a half-guinea phial; but this touches not our case. It is true, that the bite of a rabid animal, the species of disorder to which I allude, has baffled more than any other the efforts of the faculty, yet we have the searing-iron, vinegar, and, if all fails, suffocating bolsters, against the hydrophobia, but nothing, nothing alas! is on record as a specific for the sonnetomania.

Natural philosophers have been much perplexed to define the animal, the bite of which is so disastrous, or to assign it to any class; as though the breed is very common, not only in its native woods, but even in populous cities the professors of comparative anatomy have been totally unable to discover its genus, and declare that the body always evaporates under dissection. It is uncertain whether we are indebted for this pest to the devastating Arabs, or whether it was indigenous to the Swiss and Provencal mountains; but its spreading and fickle nature includes me to the former opinion. Wherever bred or born, we learn that the reavenous creature, in the early period of modern times, descended into the fertile plains of Italy, and, with a very fastidious taste, that has not been its subsequent characteristic, bit the choicest spirits of that enthusiastic land. One, in particular, it seized venomous hold of, who mistook the cause of his frenzy for love. The general symptoms of the infection, in this its first stage, very much resembled those it displays in its present, and to be hoped slaving at the mouth with inanity and froth. It must have been a curious spectacle to see the great geniuses of those days, derous Talstaff holding with the sheets as he expired. At a later period in the country referred to, it assumed a more terrific aspect: the animal increased to double, and treble its original size, and bit the whole body of the Cruscan sand-dancers; and noisily themselves into millers, and converted, with a truly typical metaphor, all poetry into bran. This is its most dangerous

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epoch; and I heartily hope the infection may never again be communicated to the critical tribe. Besides, with them it would be supererogation; and adding it to their natural "pus styque venarum," would be, as Pliny says, "Contra portans ad Newcastleum." From this time its violence abated, and leaving the sacred vessels of church and schoolmen, for the gentler blood of dunes and cedars, they began to assume a character, certainly as tormenting a one, but not so terrible as the pest, and though the mania still registed itself as ever in "the pleasant land of Italy," it has subsided into a milder disorder, and is become rather an annoyance than a disease.

With a patriotic propensity the animal revisited its native country, France, and, by infecting Benesrade and Volture, excited a civil war. The kingdom was divided, not into Cavalier and Roundhead, Jesuit and Jesuit, but into Jobellins and Uranists, the former headed by the Prince of Conti, the latter by the Duchess de Longueville. "O le bon temps," exclaims La Harpe with much gaiety, "que celui où le cour et la ville, toutes les puissances se divertissent point deux sonnets, dont l'un est fort mauvais et l'autre assez médiocre."

It afterwards visited us. Lord Surrey, who was mad enough before, being bitten more than when at Turin, jousting in honour of his Gendarme, infected his friend Wyatt, and doubtless the disease would have spread much further, had it not been burnt up with the smoke of polemical discussion. Afterwards burst out in the manner seen, but seems never to have acquired a complete mastery over the human constitution of our ancestors: they even sought the cure of the animal itself to a certain degree, and made it the companion of their leisure hours.

For upwards of two centuries the infection seemed to be almost lost, though it was never quite forgotten, and foreign and insignificant shapes, disguised so as to deceive the eyes of the sage, who dived a headlong out of the malady. It not altogether the same, this mania was very much akin to that recorded in the pages of the Spectator, when the poetical man made its appearance inclosed in every astrological batch, and butterflies. I inquire how this second disorder was distinguished; all remedies must have been vain against its infectious attacks. Unless, then, we may consider this as a realisation of the disorder, which is very doubtful, it did not rise for a long period with us, so as to cause national fear from the effects of its ravages, till of late, when it has appeared with redoubled violence, and now threatens to overturn the world once more with its symptoms of venom, ineptia, and inanity.

A friend of mine was bitten a few years since, and in the

midst of his foam and convulsions, he has ejected, during the interval, two thousand and odd sonnets,—five hundred to the moon, which sphere, by its universal influence on sonnetomania, completely proves the title of the disordered to be ranked with the unfortunate beings denominated lunatics. Thou mayest have the whole two thousand, "gentle reader, but still gentler purchaser," at No. 20, in the Scotch barracks.\* But I forget, this fabric has been demolished, and I am glad of it; for its close quarters were a terrible nest of the infected. Nevertheless, thou shalt not altogether perish, kind-hearted Ned; the most intelligible of thy moon-ditties shall be preserved, like a grub in mine amber:

There's but a border of the fair moon up,  
A shallow crescent, in whose silver breast,  
May be descried, all shadowy, the rest  
Close-cradled, as an acorn in its cup:  
It is our Earth, I've read, that thus doth light  
Thy face, fair Moon; and from thy sphere perchance  
Eyes even now on this world fix their glance  
In wonder at the planet of their night;  
For such are we to thee, as thou to us,—  
Bright partners of the sky, each other's gloom,  
Cheering with smile of mutual fondness:—  
Ye, lifeless masses, rays of love illuming,  
While me, a living soul, th' encompassing cloud  
Of loneliness hath wrapt in desolate shroud.

Poor Ned was a harmless and innocent youth; for three years he lived happy over ledger and journal, till unluckily, one "Saturday at even," the devil tempted him to make provision for the following day, a wet Sunday, with two pennyworth of a magazine. In its fair pages glittered seven sonnets, spick and span new. How he envied the initials! Put E. S. in their situation, and thought he, the fame of Ned Scroggins is complete,—the world would know and admire him,—for talents, like murder, will out. Should fourteen lines deter him, whose pen achieved thousands in the week? "Tis but setting down the rhymes first," said he, "and the rest is easy." He took heart, and his hapless man than my friend, for the whole next week, never struck pen behind his ear, in the whole realm of Cockaigne; but the poison was at work—"vulnus alicui rems." "A fig for the desk!" quoth Ned, and forth he walked from a murky counting-house in a Cheapside alley, towards Fleet-street and the Strand,

\* Great Suffolk-street, Charing-Cross, which used to be so denominated by the wags of the day.

in search of a green mead. I spied him as he strode through the Horse Guards; and from his elastic step, unusually cocked hat, and unconscious chuckle, knew that he was infected. At a cautious distance I observed him: the bomb felt the first effects of his fury; he flung a sonnet at it, nor could the innocent *Chiffre* bridge escape him. I regretted not being able to keep up with his speed, but felt the effects of his devastations through Pimlico. "Put a peg in on horseback, and he cannot ex- to the devil!"—set him on a winged horse, and he cannot expect a better fate—such was the end of Ned Scroggins! Yet if in the nether world he retain his original mania, (and much I fear his satanic majesty could not dispense with so efficient a torment,) he will be gratified by hearing, that the three months since his Hegira, have produced as many tributary sonnets from pilgrims to his grave. In the copious memoirs prefixed to his remains (yet unpublished), he was reported to have taken the distemper from Mr. Abel Shuffebottom; but it is difficult to give credit to aught reflecting on that harmless and amiable youth, who has not yet openly shewn symptoms of the disorder, though there is no saying but it may be secretly preying upon him by slow advances.

I am really quite at a loss what remedy or preventive to suggest against this dreadful and alarming complaint; purgatives do but provoke it, as we learn from Dryden, and low diet, that cools all other, even, fever, and quicken this. Horace recommends belief, as the disease of similar symptoms; but his prescription to this will do us no money-getting and sore eyes, when him to have been up, and in quest. Smoking, has been recommended as a legitimate remedy in all epidemics; but here it is of no effect,—the infection delights in a cigar, and flourishes even in the sunny climate of the older cellar. After all, the best antidote, perhaps, is clean O John Bull, and preserve thyself,—a full stomach, and a clean escape of the benefit of which I am so convinced, as not to fail a single day in swallowing my sovereign medicine.

But all use of no avail, as long as folks believe in the doctrine of *Isaiah* with the Turk, who, it is said, will purchase and wear the remnants of those who die of the plague, and will bargain with, and embrace, the infected, impressed with the strong conviction of "what must be, must," and thinking it a vain endeavour to escape that to which they were predestined. Similar are the opinions of the unfortunate patients for whom I prescribe: born with the latent heat of inspiration, the *as magis sonaturum*, they must (*il faut*) scratch head, bite nail, and sonnetize,—"*sic volvere Parcas*." O most impotent and lame conclusion

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But I shall say no more, lest my generous exertions should excite the ungrateful revenge of the insane, "fit pugil et medicum." My courage as well as my pen shrink from the task. The sonnet-maniacs would have in me an historian equal to the Abderites found in Lucian, or the Strasburgers in chapter on Noses.

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The love of wild flowers is often confounded with the love of my. No two things can be more different: they are altogether incompatible. The love of wild flowers is purely romantic; founded on hereditary reverence and old association. Men soon learn that violet and primrose are not commoner of childhood and of poetry. Now botany is no relic of prejudices or of persons. She is a hunter, after truth, a dealer in hard names, a contemner of rank, and your only true Jacobin. The rose is to her no better than a daisy. Besides, botany is a pursuit; the love of field-employment of gardening, without the toil of preparation, is a pleasure; one too that requires no trouble, but has risk of disappointment. I have always had a passion for it. How I used to enjoy sitting, on a bright May morning, under a group of young trees, chiefly larch, home-roping to the south-west! That bank has passed into my hands; I can no longer call it mine; but I still have it before me. It was the richest tapestry of flowers that I have ever running amongst them like net-work, wild hyacinths, and white, fringing, as it were, the edge of this lovely carpet, uniting it with the broom, the hawkbit, and the dandelion, and there, under the clear blue sky, listening to the rustle of the wood-pigeons, which, ascending to the sky, as she flew across the field. What a sudden nothing, feverish; nothing morbid. The "Fairy of the Excursion," these fine, out-of-door poems, as an object of despairing imitation to my dear friend, She would have a primrose-bank of her own. I forget her labours, nor their result. She dug and

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planted, and watered and hoed; counted, with Chinese patience and accuracy, the number of my flowers; set down their position in a map; ravaged the hedgerows far and near; and at last contrived to get exactly the same plants in the same places. But it would not do. She was too ambitious. She rooted out all weeds but the select and the select would die. She could cover her ground. The last thing I saw, the last thing that was five months ago: I dare say, by this time, she has not one alive.

What pretty flowers grow by the side of water! The little Veronica, called Forget-me-not, which is so like the turquoise, or the softest piece of the blue sky; and the lady's bedstraw, whose yellow cups and pale green leaves form such graceful natural wreaths, and twist so airy round a straw bonnet. In the water there is the white lily floating, like a swan; cool and fine carrying. The meadows are full of beautiful flowers. Two of the least common are the field-slip and the field-star of Bethlehem. The field-slip is very splendid. It resembles the garden-slip in figure, only smaller, and the head drooping like a snow-drop. O the beauty of the legend, head with its small, indented, delicate, and bright blue (a rose-like) and deep purple (a spinney purple) and white and red, and the sun shines through, and the petals are up, and the stem is in a graceful window. The field-slip is very elegant. The two sorts contrast well with each other, and with the deep orange stems, but rhyming together, they are not in the deep orange stream, as if commoned together, and the side of a running cipe, broken up, and the golden collection of the golden. The field-star of Bethlehem is the most precious of the violet. It resembles a large hyacinth, the blossom almost green, the stalk almost white, with a strange shadowy mixture of tints, a ghostly uncertainty, a repulsive splendour, a white clayey visible humilis in the frown, which is called the grave of Ajax. Never was any locality more appropriate. It is the flower of the grave. Not that this remarkable plant is kind or disagreeing, like that, for instance, which children call dead man's fingers; on the contrary, it maintains a sort of ghostly purity and dignity. As far as a flower can be so, the field-star of Bethlehem is awful. It is a rector of smiles; a living reminder to this melancholy plant is the peewinkle, the earliest and latest of flowers. From November to May I have seen the shining leaves and bright blue-bells bristling through the hedge-