

La Belle Assemblée 28 (1823)

So, Alfred has been busy, I see, in sketching a portrait of his brother Horace! It is a likeness, certainly; but the romance of the picture is somewhat highly coloured. Horace, though imbued with genuine poetic feeling—though alive to the beauties of nature, and a worshipper of genius in every corner of the earth—is not so engrossed by the contemplation of an ideal world, as to be insensible of what is passing in a world of reality.

Alfred is a very different character from Horace; so different, indeed, that, when together, the two present a striking contrast. Grave, solemn, and dignified, he possesses none of the arch playfulness that lights up the smiling countenance of his junior brother. With a high sense of integrity, justice, and honour, he combines no small portion of ambition; and, desirous of employing the family interest, at some future period, to ensure his return as one of the knights of the shire, he devotes himself chiefly to the study of ancient and modern history, of the constitution of his country, of the laws of nations, and of political economy in all its variety of detail. His mind is comprehensive, bold, and firm; his organic powers are great and imposing. In Parliament he will prove the detector and the scourge of corruption, the unthought independent supporter of the altar and the throne.

THE FORCE OF IMAGINATION.

There is no faculty more delightful, and at the same time more terrific, than imagination. It may be rendered the source of pleasures the most exquisite, of miseries the most acute; and, in its conduct, truth and fiction are at times so intimately and indistinguishably blended, that it becomes difficult to draw a line, and determine where the one ends and the other begins. Men are fond of the marvellous; and I know nothing that gratifies the narrators of such stories more, than to see their auditors with every faculty held in suspense, or rather concentrated in mute attention. If there be one or two, here and there, with their mouths agape while enough for a horse-dragon to travel down the

Alfred, however, neglects not such lighter studies as may facilitate the attainment of his object, namely its success, and attempt with *écarté*. Favoured by nature with a voice full, clear, and mellow, of stentorian force, and admirably harmonized in its tones, he employs it daily in the recitation of poetry, and of the finest orations of Greece and Rome. Thus, gradually, and almost insensibly, with the essentials of education he acquires its freedom, its grace, and its dignity. Nothing, indeed, can prevent him from becoming an orator of the first order of excellence, unless, in some evil hour, he should yield to the solicitations of his friend, Harry Burnet, and submit to take lessons of one of those accomplished persons, who, through the medium of the daily prints, obligingly tender their services to qualify young ladies and gentlemen for the stage—and to "finish" the latter for the pulpit, the bar, or the senate. Circumstances considered, our time has passed not unpleasantly—not unprofitably. Our literary correspondence is rather extensive than otherwise; and, as our little circle is sometimes enlarged by the arrival of select and friendly visitors, whose intellectual wealth is freely added to the common stock, the authors of "*The Tauxivarts*" confidently, though unassumingly, hope to excite some portion of public notice.

C. A. O.

throat, or with eyes starting from their sockets, so much the better. Finding them thus liberally inclined to swallow, or to devour with their optics, whatever they may think proper to present, it is rarely that they fail to embellish and exaggerate.

It is said of Pisanter, a Rhodian historian, that, infected with a terror of meeting his own ghost, he avoided going abroad. His friends endeavoured to reason him out of this ghostly fancy. He would listen to them patiently, and agree to all the premises, till he found that they were about summing up, when he would start up, exclaiming—"I deny the whole of it—I deny the whole of it." This story, if true, exhibits a singular picture of the mind, where

the power of reason is acknowledged till it is likely to interfere with the power of imagination.

I remember somewhere meeting with an account of a young man who fancied himself dead, and repeatedly urged his friends to bury him. Finding every effort fail to effect a cure, they at length hit on the following experiment. He was dressed in his grave clothes and laid upon a bier, which was borne by several men; when, near the cemetery, they were met by some others, who inquired of the bearers who they were carrying to the grave? On being informed, they immediately began to load the deceased with the most opprobrious epithets, and to relate stories of him, by which he appeared in a most ridiculous and contemptible light. The man of *fénelay* lay and listened till his "spirit waxed wroth;" when, starting from his recumbent position, he flew among his traducers, and fully atoned, by the infliction of pugilistic chastisement, how keenly he felt the sense of injury. The purpose of his friends was now completely answered; the exertion he had used, and the agitation of spirits he had endured, circulated his blood, and dissipated the morbid fancies which had haunted his imagination. He awoke as from a dream, and in a day or two was sufficiently recovered to laugh at his former malady.

A volume might be filled with the strange fancies of women, when in the situation that "ladies wish to be who love their lords," though, at the present day, a belief in the effects of such a morbid state of sensation is nearly exploded.

I now come to my own actual experience. There is nothing I cannot believe of a highly excited imagination during the jatroxism; that is, during some short interval of excessive agitation; but such extraordinary phenomena, when they prevail during a considerable portion of life, are not the result of imagination but of madness. I shall here relate an incident in my own life that affected me dreadfully at the time, and left a most fearful impression long after. Even now a thrill of horror attends the recollection. Let me premise, that I had the misfortune to be an only son, and that as such I was privileged to have as many faults as I pleased. "To correct the dear boy would break his charming spirits,

and the world would do that soon enough." I was an excellent patron of the glasses, keeping them in employment all the year round. In China they have a religious celebration called "the feast of lanterns;" in the immediate vicinity of my residence, there might very properly have been a "lament of lanterns," their destruction being one of my principal pleasures, whether employed by old women, or by their enemies, the watchmen. Once I was nearly the death of a young lady by frightening her horse; and my mother, on hearing of it, expressed her regret that "I was such an arch lad." Let me perpetrate what mischief I might, the only redress the complaint obtained, was the information that I was "a funny boy." Fate, as if to punish the perversity of my nature, took from me the only persons who were inclined to tolerate my conduct. My parents died within a short time of each other, and left me, with a very considerable patrimony, to the care of an uncle, whom I commonly designated by the title of *Old Oyster Squared*, and his sister by that of *Mrs. Pickled*; little thinking that she ever would be authorized to give a kick of mine, which, in the way of salutary correction, she often subsequently did. The establishment of an old bachelor, or of an old maid, *separately*, is not a paradise. What are their joys, when they meet in the same house—sour, sulky, and insupportable! I now suffered enough, physically and mentally, to atone for all my former sins. I was once mischievous, from a wanton love of mischief; I was now so from a sense of duty. The equity of Providence, I thought, had sent me into this *seamy* firm as a domestic scourge; and in giving *Squered* and Co. some real cause for virulence and ill-temper, I saved them from the sin of which they had hitherto been in the constant commission—that of careless grumbling and unprovoked malice. All this my readers may be sure made me an *excellent* *jeuneur*. "Oh! he's a pleasant boy," my uncle, with ironical bitterness, would often exclaim; while, in a tone which denoted remarkably well with that of the last speaker, *Mrs. Pickled* would cry, "Ah! God help his parents—'tis well they're dead—no doubt he killed them!" Having thus in her own mind set me down as a

partide, of course there was no usage too bad for me; and as love begets love, I naturally thought much the same of hatred with regard to her; not but that I will always say, there was a virtue in my motives which *her* wanted; my aim was the correction of her faults; and he who could undertake such an Herculean task must have had no common mind. I was aware that the best medicines were made up of the bitterest ingredients, and I usually squared my proceedings by that rule.

Thus, in the constant reciprocation of kind offices, I attained my fifteenth year, and the articling me to an attorney became a subject of contemplation. My departure, however, was impeded by the sudden indisposition of my aunt, doubtless occasioned by the thoughts of parting with me. I fully expected to see her bound over to keep the peace at last; but I might have remembered that there are some "too bad to be taken away;" and this seems to have been her case; for, contrary to every expectation and every wish, she was restored to us in all her former strength and spirits. Like Mrs. Malaprop, "she was in her bloom yet," though sixty summers had shed their's over her.

Again I was on the wing, when late once more cruel "*Arrivée-mour*." My uncle now took his turn to hold a *tête-à-tête* with disease, which in a very short time delivered him to the cold cure of death. Never shall I forget the scene of weeping and wailing that ensued. My aunt was a perfect water-spout; and the damsel who had acted as *fille de chambre* in the family for the last forty years, howled most *arrogamment* in chorus. Towards evening the more violent emotions of these gentle maidens subsided; and as night approached my aunt mentioned the necessary decorum of some one sitting up with the deceased. My aunt and her only domestic, the patient Deborah, were too delicately nerved to undertake such a task; and hiring any of the superannuated old women of the village would be attended with expense, to which my worthy aunt had a natural and hereditary antipathy. I was present at this confabulation, and soon saw by the side looks of reference cast at me, that I was expected to make an offer. I felt it would be an impeachment of my courage if I held

back, and I therefore tendered my veto.

At ten o'clock, therefore, as the two tones of the family departed to rest, I took a light and entered the chamber of death. It was a cold November night, and I had not been so inattentive to my comfort, but that I had a fire kindled in the grate, a jug of ale beside, and a book on the table before me. The room in which I sat was one of those awkward apartments, which are often found in old-fashioned houses. The chimney was immensely wide—the windows were casements, which rattled in the wind, and from a peculiar formation of the room, the foot of the bedstead on which my uncle's lifeless form lay stretched was but a very short distance from the table at which I was seated; while immediately behind and before me was a deep space, constituting the entire breadth of the room. As I closed the door and took my seat at the huge chimney side, I felt an odd and unpleasant feeling come over me; but that it was *fear* I would not acknowledge, even to myself. I knew, as Bob Acres said, "that valour would come and go," and I therefore determined to prevent the *grrrs* of mine, by causing an *ingress* of air; and from time to time, at short intervals, I contrived to see the bottom of my jug. The potency of the liquor, acting on a head seldom permitted so liberal a portion, put me to sleep. How long I thus kept watch, like a true watchman, I know not; but I was suddenly awakened by a report loud as a clap of thunder. I started erect in my seat, and listened: I could hear nothing but the hollow-musings of the wind that rolled in low murmurs round the desolate dwelling, and shook the capacious windows. My unsmuffed candle was burning dimly, the last red embers in the grate had sunk in darkness. A kind of instinctive horror struck me, as I awoke to a consciousness of my situation. My own breathing seemed that of some one else; yet I knew I sat alone with the corpse. I feared to move in my chair, and therefore, I (by slow degrees) sunk back in my chair to wait the issue of a night now pregnant with horror. As I looked on the bed where the corpse lay, I saw the bed-clothes moved, as though it were sitting. Terror fixed my sight, and I gazed on without being able to withdraw my eyes. The clothes moved, and

I saw the feet drawn up, and presently the corpse sat erect. It stared at me with its dim, film-covered eye; gradually it slid itself down the bedstead, till it was completely seated at its foot, with its feet resting on the floor: still the dimly-glowing look of death was fixed immovably on me. At length, with its hands stretched down on each side, it leaned forward and *grinned at me*. With a sympathetic, or rather convulsive feeling, I grinned also. My grin was the tremendous expulsion of the breath, resulting from hysteric horror; that of the corpse was deadly malice! This *grin* repeated many times; and every time, though by what means I could not see, we approached nearer each other, till my face touched that of the deceased. At the same instant it darted upon me, clutching with its cold bony hands my shoulders!—"Human nature could bear no more, and I sunk senseless on the ground!"

In this state I was found the next morning, and conveyed to bed. The noise that had awakened me in the night, was the falling of an old gate in the neighbourhood, which had long hung but loosely on its hinges, and was just then entirely overthrown by the violence of the winds. All that followed, I need not say, was the effect of imagination.

This circumstance has often subsequently led me to reflect on the nature of imagination, the appearance of spectres, and the various beliefs in dreams, omens, presentiments, &c.; and the result has always been, a conviction that they are all purely and simply the effect of an intellect more or less disordered. In all these pretend-lyly superhuman visitations we are addressed in language—if speech be employed at all—so ambiguous, that it is susceptible of many meanings, and as often of no meaning at all. Nor do we ever derive benefit from these warnings of the future or recreations of the past. A modern writer very sensibly remarks: "If we consider how many dreams are dreamt every night, and how many events occur every day, we shall no longer wonder at those accidental coincidences which ignorance mistakes for verifications." I look upon remarkable dreams something in the light of conjurators and generals: they are commemorated and remembered; while the jumbles of which we can make neither head nor tail, and

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which no event arises to correspond with, are like the general mass of the army—they fall without record or distinction. The same author observes, that "there are numberless instances on record where dreams have brought about their own fulfilment, owing to the weakness and credulity of mankind. The mother of Abbot, who filled the archiepiscopal throne of Canterbury in the reign of James the First, had a dream that if she could eat a pike, the child with which she was then pregnant would be a son, and rise to great preferment. Not long after this, in taking a pull of water out of the river Wey, she accidentally caught a pike, and thus had an opportunity of fulfilling the first part of her dream. This story being much noised about, and coming to the ears of some persons of distinction, they became sponsors to the child, and his future patrons."

The Greeks and Romans paid great attention to dreams, and divided their various sorts into classes. Macrobius, and Cicero, and more ancients than it is necessary to mention here, have written on the subject. From a passage in Plutarch's life of Aristides, it appears that there were tables kept for the interpretation of dreams. Magnus was celebrated for his skill in the solution of these mysteries, and his house used to be thronged with people of rank seeking interpretations. In the time of Augustus this superstition had reached its acme; and a proclamation was issued, enjoining all who had dreams respecting the state, to make them known by *placard*, or by the public crier. In time these dreams became so numerous, that the order was restricted to the magistrates. Augustus himself used to notice the periods of the year in which his dreams were favourable or otherwise. In all times, ancient and modern, in all nations, savage and civilized, dreams have held a decided sway over the mind. Among the North American Indians "the marches are regulated by the dreams of the old warriors, who, under this pretence, often convey information gained by spies; but it must be observed that they only pay attention to *dreamers of established character*."

Among other curious instances of dreaming, Smellie mentions one of a student of medicine in the university of Edinburgh,

who was accustomed to talk and answer questions in his sleep. Some friend once whispered in his ear the name of a lady to whom he was attached: at first he talked incoherently; but soon his dreams related evidently to the object of his affections. He thought he was under her window, and he upbraided her for not appearing to him, as she had frequently done before; at length, becoming impatient, he started up in his sleep, and threw whatever he could lay his hand on against the opposite wall of his chamber, evidently supposing it the window of his mistress's room. When told of these circumstances next day, he said he had only a faint recollection of having dreamed about his mistress. Bettie relates a still more striking instance of the effect of sensation in producing dreams. A gentleman in the army was so sensible of audible impressions during his sleep, that by speaking in his ear his friends could make him dream whatever they pleased. One night, they carried him through all the process of a duel; and at last, putting a pistol in his hand, he actually fired it off, and was awakened by the sound. The unfortunate Baron Trenck relates that, when almost perishing with hunger, he was continually dreaming of plentiful and luxurious tables, and the dungeons in which he breathed all day were at night converted into banquet rooms. How infinite must have been his disappointment on waking!

While upon the subject of dreams, how curious and interesting a question arises as to the nature of the dreams of the *blind*, to whom the *visual* world is a blank—who have no means of bringing ideas to the magazine of the mind but through the medium of sound and touch. The most remarkable instance I have met with is in the case of Dr. Blacklock, related by Smellie. Dr. Reid asked him if he had any idea of light; and upon his replying in the negative, he inquired if there were any difference between his ideas of persons and objects when he dreamed, and of those which were excited while awake? Dr. Blacklock replied, the difference was great, but at first he was unable to explain it. Afterwards, with some degree of exultation, he exclaimed—"now I have it."

(Translated from the Italian of Cardinal Bona.)

Soon as stern Winter quits the earth and skies,
And milder seasons claim their genial sway,
The youthful Stag, upspringing with the day,
Forth from his native wood impetuous flies,
And takes by vales and streams his dewy way;
Now o'er the hill, and now by dale, and
Crops the fresh flowers, and breathes the morning air,
Far from the shepherd and the busy town,
Nor dreads the secret shaft or hidden snare.
Yet soon he feels, amidst his wild delight,
The cruel Hunter's unexpected dart:—
So, Lady, rashly, with unguarded heart,
I madly ventured in your fatal sight,
Nor knew my danger, till I felt the smart.

SONNET.

When he was awake, he could distinguish persons *three ways*; by hearing them speak, by feeling their heads and shoulders, or by attending without the aid of speech to the sound and manner of their breathing; but, in sleep, the objects which presented themselves were more vivid, and without the intervention of any of these three modes, he had distinct perceptions of distant objects, both animate and inanimate. Being asked by what means he thought these impressions were conveyed to him, he replied, that he imagined his body was united to theirs by a kind of distant contact, effected by the instrumentality of threads, or strings, which proceeded from their bodies to his own, and that mutual ideas were conveyed by vibrations of these strings. From all, then, that I have heard, read, seen, or experienced, I should allow dreams to arise from every or any cause rather than supernatural agency. Hypocondriacal people have usually distressing dreams. The superstitious never seem sufficiently to consider the influence of health, circumstances, and occupations. It is full time, however, to put on my nightcap; so with a very suitable couplet, for which I have to thank Sir Walter Scott, I shall beg leave to nod—

"To all and each a fair good night,
And pleasant dreams and slumbers light."

R.