A HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO

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REMARKABLE CASES OF SENILE DELIRIUM

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During the last thirty-five years I have attended several old persons who have died while labouring under senile delirium.

Their symptoms have assumed different characters, but they were all more or less attended with one that was uniform – namely excessive talking. Sometimes the conversation would be apparently rational for a few minutes, when the patient would begin to talk of all kinds of subjects, frequently of the most unconnected description; and this would continue hour after hour, and day after day, until death ensued; the subject being worn out by sheer exhaustion, and having, as it were, "talked himself to death," as in the case below.

A lady of a literary turn, aged 70

Miss F, aged 70, was naturally a vigorous, energetic person, and of a highly nervous temperament. Gout was hereditary in her family, and although she had never experienced what is called a "fit of the gout," she had lost the sight of her left eye from an attack of gouty inflammation.

This lady was of a literary turn, and wrote both prose and poetry, but the former of these far exceeded the latter in merit.

She had been subject all her life to occasional attacks of headache, connected with biliary derangement and had not felt herself quite well for a short time before her last illness.

"Everything she uttered was in rhyme, and the ingenuity she displayed in promptly finding the rhyme was very remarkable...She gradually sank, apparently from exhaustion and having talked herself to death"

I was sent for early in the morning, and was told she had not had any sleep during the night, but had been talking incessantly. When I saw her she was sitting up in the bed and was rambling incoherently, but everything she uttered was in rhyme, and the ingenuity she displayed in promptly finding the rhyme was very remarkable. During the whole of her illness, which lasted a week, I never once found her at fault in this respect, and she never was more at a loss to give utterance to her thoughts in rhyme than if she had expressed them in the ordinary mode of conversation. She gradually sank, apparently from exhaustion and having talked herself to death.

The butler and the baronet

There are many facts which seem to show that aged people are sometimes allowed to die unnecessarily.

Instances might be quoted of persons who were believed to be dead, but were recovered, and amongst them was that of a celebrated west country baronet who was laid out in his coffin. His old butler volunteered to watch his master's corpse through the night; but, most probably, thinking the time would hang heavy on him, he invited a friend to share his vigil with him.

This butler's only fault, as a servant, was his indulgence in stimulating beverages; and he did not omit, on this occasion, to have recourse to them. As the night wore on, the idea arose in the butler's mind that there would be no harm if he administered to his late master a glass of the brandy he and his companion were engaged in drinking, and he proposed it to his comrade, saying, "He has been a good master to me for many years, and has given me many a glass, and I will do the same by him before he is taken from our sight." He did as he said, and poured a glass of brandy down his master's throat, which had the instantaneous effect of recalling him to life, and he survived for many years.

"As the night wore on, the idea arose in the butler's mind that there would be no harm if he administered to his late master a glass of the brandy"

The Dowager Lady C

An analogous case occurred in my own practice some years ago. One evening about eight o'clock, the coachman belonging to the Dowager Lady C, ran to my house and begged me to come to his mistress directly, for from what the servants told him, he said, she was either dying or dead.

The distance was short from my house, and I was speedily there. Lady C was in her bedroom, sitting in the high-backed chair and behind it stood a medical man. His first observation to me was " her Ladyship is gone."

Indeed she presented all the appearance of death having taken place. Her face was deadly white and cold, her jaw had dropped, but her eyes were closed. I felt her pulse, and detected the faintest possible thrill beneath my finger, and I could only compare it to the tension of the finest cambric thread.

Lady C's daughter-in-law was standing beside me, and I asked her for some brandy, which she immediately ran for and brought. I poured out a large wine glass full and poured it over the tongue, and it ran down the throat as readily as if it had been poured into a jug. The moment it had reached the stomach Lady C revived, giving a spasmodic gasp, opened her eyes, and said, " Bring me a basin."

A basin was brought to her, and she at once vomited into it. Bringing up her dinner, which had been only hashed hare. She was speedily regained perfect consciousness, and inquired of me, what I did there at that time of the evening.

At this time Lady C was 80 years old and she lived for five years afterwards.

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