

## MEDICAL.

### ABERRATIONS OF THE WILL IN MENTAL AND NERVOUS DISEASES.

BY PROF. SELDEN H. TALCOTT, M.D., MIDDLETOWN, N.Y.

#### No. 2.

"Aye! who doubts that, a will, a wicked will,  
A woman's will, a cankered grandam's will."

IT is easy to recognize the fact in ordinary human experience that healthy and sane individuals are gifted with either strong wills or weak wills, or fickle and changeable wills. But beyond these natural varieties we may pass to a consideration of those wills which have been disturbed or diverted from their natural tendencies by the influence of disease.

Making all due allowance for the erratic and weak wills, we find in numerous instances that when the disease known as insanity has taken firm hold of the individual, the will powers appear to have changed quite perceptibly from their normal courses. Sometimes the will is stimulated by the disease to intense and unusual action. Then we may see the individual not only conceiving larger projects in business than he had ever dreamed of before, but sometimes you may find a remarkable force and energy of will developed in the execution of those projects. Under the influence of a hyper-stimulated will, preceded and accompanied by an insane delusion, a man went West and in less than ten years accumulated a handsome fortune. Then he died, under the visitation and effects of that insanity which had stimulated him to action, leaving his property to the fools that came after him.

Sometimes there is a faltering of will-power, as in the case of imbeciles, who are the victims of checked growth. In many cases of moderate but persistent brain disease the patient perceives fairly well, enjoys an undisturbed consciousness of his surroundings and the impressions which they make; thinks with moderate accuracy, generates ideas with gentle activity, reasons logically but without much positive force, and judges with average correctness concerning his ordinary and every-day experiences. Yet, on account of the fact that his will falters and hesitates, he becomes a helpless, inefficient and useless clod in society. The non-activity of the ordinary imbecile illustrates this truth; while the will-failure of the common drunkard is somewhat proverbial. The latter, under the influence of disease, self-induced, cannot regulate, restrain or control his action.

The usual evidences of insanity are said to be "departures from the normal mental status, and changes in the states of feeling and modes of thinking common to the individual when in health." Delusions, which are false

beliefs; hallucinations, which are false perceptions by any of the senses; these are commonly considered as among the most important evidences of insanity. These relate to impressions, to consciousness, to thought, to reasoning, to judgment; and, through the disturbance of all these primary functions of the mind, the final and directing function, called will-power, is at last itself disturbed.

Impairment of will is one of the most serious and positive evidences of insanity. It is this impairment which produces that loss of self-control which makes it imperative for society to step in and protect the lunatic from doing harm to himself or others. This impairment of will is one of those evidences of insanity which has not always been fully or thoroughly recognized. There are many cases of disputed insanity where a correct verdict could be obtained if the impairment or loss of will power through the effects of disease were properly and justly recognized at true value as a diagnostic indication. The time will come when the insane person will be judged just as much by his actions as by the utterance of wild delusions. And when the impairment of will is discovered before dangerous action has resulted, and proper restrictions placed upon the patient, then a larger safety for society may be hoped for. Many a dangerous man with a disordered will runs at large without let or hindrance, until, by some erratic and irresponsible action, either the possessor of that disturbed will or his neighbor is suddenly destroyed. Such "accidents" should be guarded against by the wise and intelligent physician through timely advice to the friends of the suffering and dangerous victim of disturbed will-power.

As an example of paroxysmal infirmity of will we might quote the action of the woman who shot O'Donovan Rossa. Here was a person with an apparently fixed and determined purpose to rid the world of a being whom she regarded with aversion and horror because he was said to be an inciter of the ruthless murder of helpless women and children. Stimulated by such a belief, a belief as earnest and lofty as that cherished by Charlotte Corday, the assassin of Marat, she attempted to kill O'Donovan Rossa. Before the work was half completed she desisted from shooting. She gave, as an excuse for stopping in the midst of her deadly work, the chivalric reason that she could not shoot at a man after he was down. But had the spirit of chivalry really ruled her entire action, she would not have taken her victim unawares, nor would she have shot him in the back. The reason she gave for her sudden cessation of shooting was, in fact, an illogical reason; for she had already displayed her ability to violate the creed of British chivalry by shooting unawares, and by shooting at her victim from behind. Having violated the creed upon two points, she certainly might have continued its violation upon another point in order to accomplish what at the outset she believed to be a grand and righteous undertaking. It seems to me that a sane woman, having worked herself up to the point of assassi-