

A Checkered Life

by John Alexander Joyce, 1883.



CHAPTER IV.

A DESCRIPTION OF LUNATIC FANCIES.

EASTERN KENTUCKY LUNATIC ASYLUM, }
Lexington, Ky., June 12th, 1881. }

COL. JOHN A. JOYCE, Washington, D. C.:

DEAR SIR:—The records of this Asylum show the following, to-wit:

No. 2423, John A. Joyce, Montgomery County, Ky.; native of Ireland; 18 years of age; single; occupation, farmer; Catholic; habits; temperate and industrious; original disposition and intellect good, excellent; cause, hereditary form; mania, hallucination, perpetual motion. Admitted June 26, 1860. Discharged September 1st, 1860. Recovered.

Respectfully,

W. A. BULLOCK, M. D.

Med. Sup't E. Ky. L. A.

It is a rare thing for a recovered lunatic to write the history of his own derangement. The foregoing letter, received recently, is the evidence of truth and identity. Science and skill in every age have struggled to master the manipulated brain of the maniac, and ascertain the cure for a diseased mind. The body, the tangible part of man, can be easily nursed back from a dying skeleton form to robust health, but the intangible, wild, spectral mind has no chains to bind its rushing pinions, and no cure to quiet the crumbling fabric of imagination.

The mind or soul of man is unfathomable, and no plummet has ever yet been found to touch the bottom of this universal ocean. A very large majority of lunatics emerge from hereditary mouldings. The father or mother are the source of lunatic beings, and actual begetting is the fountain-head of the

long train of fearful troubles that follow in the wake of the insane mind. The action of a moment ushers millions of human beings into "this breathing world scarce half made up, and that so rude and unfashioned" that long years and the lonely grave can only obliterate the terrible torture that reigns forever in the memory of the maniac.

When I look over vanished years and count the milestones along my rugged road of life, I approach with fear the fiery pillar that lit up the glowing realms of my lost mind. I should not speak now upon this phase of my checkered career were it not that a sense of duty impels me to give my experience to the friends and relatives of lunatics, as well as to impress attendants and doctors having charge of the insane with a proper sense of their responsibility.

I say it without fear of medical contradiction, that a full-fledged lunatic was never cured by brutal force or unreasonable restraint. All human beings have minds as varied as their features, and meat for one is poison for another.

In the days of Galileo, Tasso and the Prisoner of Chillon, it was considered the correct thing to put the insane in a deep dungeon, chained to a stone pillar, shut out from the sunlight, with no music to cheer the weary hours of day or lonely moments of night save the clanking of their chains or the wild echoes of their melancholy moans.

"His bread was such as captives' tears
Have moistened many a thousand years,
Since man first pent his fellow men
Like brutes within an iron den."

Things have changed but little since those cruel ancient days. In Europe, Asia, Africa and America, at this very hour, thousands of poor human creatures, lost to friends and memory, are languishing in madhouses and almshouses, tortured by ignorant attendants, encased in straight-jackets, pent up in padded rooms, doused in shivering baths and shower-chairs, strapped to iron cots, or tortured by the lash of some petty tyrant who imagines that brutal blows can subdue the

mind. Ah, friends, how very little doctors and their assistants know about the cure for insanity! All the medical platitudes ever written by so-called scientific gentlemen have not touched the outer edge of the insane land. It is a *terra incognita* to all save those who inhabit the realm.

The leaves that tremble in the forest, the sands that glisten on the sea-shore, and the stars that twinkle in the blue vault of heaven, multiplied by incalculable millions, cannot compare with the various ideas that bubble up in the mind of the maniac. Every human being with a grain of common sense is liable to become crazy. A fool or an idiot cannot penetrate into the sacred land of the insane. The ancients worshiped madmen, and they were held sacred by the enlightened people of antiquity. They said, let no one dare abuse what God has touched with his magic wand. The brightest minds that have been ushered into life were touched by the spell of insanity; and I might say that every great undertaking in this world has been invented, discovered or conjured up by the brain of a person who had the insanity of deep, unusual thought, and the unfaltering mania of desperate perseverance.

From the foregoing general principles, I shall proceed directly to the specific facts, as intensely and distinctly remembered in my own case.

In the spring of 1860 a vivid flash of imagination shot across my brain like zigzag lightning from a blue sky. I told my father and uncle, who were then living near Mt. Sterling, that I wished to take a course in bookkeeping at Duff's commercial college in Pittsburg, and to this end induced them to give me a hundred dollars to start for the "smoky city." I went to Cincinnati, and thence by boat to Pittsburg. On my way up the river I had the wildest and strangest feelings about life and the small, creeping human things that crawled over the earth. The idea of running the world and the wheels of traffic by *perpetual motion* sprang into my mind. I felt sure that the real problem of life was solved—a force superior to the attraction of gravitation! Newton and his falling apple

were but atoms in the great discovery of running things by perpetually acting balances suspended like a see-saw plank on a middle pivot throwing out living oil into the fibers of the great machine, which was to run on the principle of the circulation of the blood—one continuous round of circulating force and fluid, beginning at the end and ending at the beginning!

Even now I believe the day is near at hand when the industrial machinery of the world will be run perpetually by electricity extracted from the air we breathe, and that we shall navigate the upper atmosphere with greater velocity and certainty than has ever been attained by man on land or sea. The flight of the condor, eagle or wild pigeon cannot equal the height and swiftness that man, in his wisdom, will yet achieve.

It was midnight when I arrived at Pittsburg. Instead of remaining on the boat, I wandered out upon the levee, amid piles of freight, coal and iron, that covered the banks of the river. About daylight I found myself in a modest hotel not far from Duff's college. After breakfast, with no sleep the previous night, I saw Mr. Duff at his school. If I remember rightly, he used an ear-trumpet to assist his defective hearing. I entered my name on the school-roll, purchased some preliminary books, and spent a few hours in writing up a common day journal. That night, on my return to the hotel, I felt my mission to be the lecture-field or theatrical boards; and as a large number of mediocre people succeeded in these vocations, there was no reason why a man of my imagined greatness should not at once "hire a hall," "surprise the natives," and scoop in a fortune in a night.

The very next day I went to a printing office, had some bills struck off advertising an intellectual variety show at Lafayette Hall. I even went to the trouble to have a tin box made, wherein the doorkeeper might put the cash and tickets received by him in the rush of the natives to hear the most wonderful prodigy of the age! That night I appeared on the

stage at Lafayette Hall, and with song, dance, poetry, oratory, and flights of lunatic fancy surprised the few stragglers who paid their money to see a living lunatic on the mimic stage of life.

Poor King Lear, with the dead Cordelia in his arms, crying for the vault of heaven to crack, was not more mad than I, instructing and amusing an audience in a public hall of a great city. The curtain was finally rung down, the lights turned out, and the bill-poster met me at the door to receive compensation for services rendered. I, like all great men, referred the plebian to my agent, the fellow who kept the tin box and its contents. To this day I have never learned the fate of the bill poster or the agent. There may be some citizens in the Pittsburg theatrical world who can call to mind the foregoing facts, and wonder and laugh at how they were taken in by a lunatic; yet I have no doubt that often since they have been the victims of men not half as honest and sincere as I was at that time.

I next turned up in Wheeling, wandering about the streets, and through the homes of former friends. From Wheeling I went to Moundsville, thence to Marietta, Ohio. While in Marietta I was taken up by some humane person, and placed in the county lunatic asylum. They put me in a small room with bars across the windows and strong bolts bracing the door. For the first time I was deprived of liberty; and my royal spirit realized the shock, and outraged nature turned with a bound and smashed everything intervening between it and freedom. Before being locked up, I was kind and harmless; but the loss of liberty worked my mind into a perfect frenzy, and aroused the very devil in my tortured brain. I would have smashed or killed anything coming between me and freedom, and well it was for the keeper that I was not allowed access to those whom I imagined were the authors of my incarceration. In fact, I was pent up in a small, hot room, like a wild beast, and outraged nature revolted at the cruel treatment.

In some way, my father found me. His good old face and soothing voice broke in upon my imprisoned spirit like a flash of sunshine. A calm came over my mind, and the murky clouds of despair vanished. In a short time I was dressed, out in the open fields, and on the road to Kentucky. I confidentially told my father, as we moved along, that I had discovered perpetual motion; and, what was more, that I had found the philosopher's stone, or the secret of turning pebbles of earth into gold! As an evidence of my wild fancy, I picked up a dark pebble, scratched it with a pin, when—lo! and behold—it turned to yellow gold!

Even at this day I can see the smile on the lip and the tear in the eye of my dear old father, who seemingly assented to my hallucination, and even flattered my vanity. It took no harsh treatment—no bolts, bars or straight-jackets—to hold my body. I followed the directions of my father like a sportive lamb, and every terror was banished from my heart by his kind words and consoling actions. Liberty, even in my insane mind, was fostered by love, and although the balance-wheel of understanding flew around without a governor, the soul yet lingered in its sphere, but could not control the insane impulses of the infinitesimal fibers of the volcanic brain.

In due time, we arrived at my home near Mt. Sterling. For a few days, I seemed to be recovering from the mania that pursued me, and when thrown among schoolmates and friends, gleams of sanity would come and go like wavelets on a summer sea. I wandered about town for some time; visited the old seminary—the former theatre of my intellectual triumphs,—and mingled with my old schoolmates. It soon became plain to all my friends that the lunatic asylum was the proper place for one of my deranged mind. With deep sorrow and mournful regrets, a jury was impaneled, an investigation took place, and I was in due form pronounced *non compos mentis*, and ordered sent to the Eastern Lunatic Asylum at Lexington. The next morning I mounted the stage-box with a keeper and friend, and rode over the Winchester pike, singing on the way

with a heart as light as the mist on the mountains. I imagined that I had been elected to the legislature of Kentucky, and was on my way to Frankfort to make laws for a lot of crazy people in Montgomery county. When we arrived in Lexington, I was taken out to see what was pictured to me as the capitol of Kentucky, where I would, of course, shine as an orator and statesman of extraordinary ability.

The long red brick building, four stories high, with regular rows of windows, broke full upon my view as I entered the enclosure of the asylum. I immediately mounted the steps leading into the front hall, and strode the long corridors like a king familiar with his ancestral palace. The doctor and his attendants seemed very obsequious, and took me through various doors, halls and apartments, until at last I was snugly placed in one of the upper wards, where an iron cot, bare walls and barred windows convinced me in a momentary return to sanity that I was anything but a king. All the terrors of my Ohio den came back like a flash. I hammered at the door, yelled through the window at quiet lunatics on the lawn, upset my iron cot, tore the sheets into strips and made them into a rope, that I might escape imprisonment and descend to the grass, flowers and sunshine that covered the fields and gardens below.

My mind was so wild, and muscles so strong for a boy of eighteen, that it took half a dozen attendants to overpower and strap me down to an iron cot. In fact, I smashed things fearfully and tore off every garment from my body, in an imagined desperate fight for liberty, the sweetest and dearest thing on earth to the human heart, and especially to the insane mind. Of course, a lot of rough and brutal attendants overpowered my body, but they did not convince my mind nor quiet my voice against their terrible tyranny. No! the soul within was more defiant than ever, and no physical punishment could subdue the God-given mind or curb its flights.

I was finally taken out of the regular wards and put in a place called Botany Bay, at the end of the lawn, where the

maddest maniacs were consigned to straight-jackets, dungeons, chains and the tortures of a living hell! Wild, horrible, unearthly shrieks sounded in my ears night and day, and all the imps of pandemonium martialled in a fairy battalion could not have made more clangor, to my mind. All was "like sweet bells jangled out of tune." I was turned into an open vault-room to parade with the rest of the animals, but soon the doctors and attendants learned that I was a royal Bengal tiger, and would not herd with common beasts. I immediately put to flight the biggest and wildest of the drove, and made them cower before my imagined superiority. A big, burly attendant slipped up behind me, felled me to the floor, and dragged me to a dark room, where I was chained to the wall, strapped to a bare iron cot, punished and rebuked for a poor distorted mind that God in His wisdom endowed me with.

I, myself, was not myself; but what was left of my independent self revolted at the ignorant and cruel treatment of men who knew not that soul and liberty cannot be mastered, curbed or confined. You may stripe and torture this frail tenement of clay, but no cruel ingenuity of man has yet devised the means to harness the immortal mind.

The blow of the attendant rankled more in my heart than on my body. I determined to be even with the ignorant brute, and to this end cunningly prevailed on him to allow me more freedom in the little cellar-room, and also implored the doctors, when they visited me, to grant more liberty. Dr. Chipley, the superintendent of the asylum, was an intelligent, though rough-looking, gray-haired man. I imagined that he was an uncle of the devil, and that the patients were all his children. The Doctor, although curt, was innately kind; and I am convinced now that many rude acts were done by the attendants that did not come to his knowledge, else the man who struck me would have been dismissed at once.

Dr. Dudley was the assistant—a man whose gentle words and graceful action stole upon my affections like sunshine amid opening flowers. I put him down as my friend, and would

take medicine from his hands when the proffered cup from attendants was considered rank poison. For weeks I was confined in a small basement room, with an upper grated window to admit light and air. My door was bolted, and food was poked through an aperture, as wild beasts are fed at a circus.

All was lonely and sad until I made friends of two little mice and a family of gray spiders that sought my cell for safety. Part of my daily food was set apart for the mice. At first they were very shy at my impulsive movements and shrieking voice, and would dart into their hole in the wall like a flash. But, finally, kindness begot confidence, confidence banished fear, and in a short time they ate from my hand, played on the cot, or danced around the room to a low musical trill that I whistled for their amusement. The big dark spiders would come out of their thick web and eat the flies I caught for their meal. Sometimes they would fight for their food; but like a metropolitan policeman, I came to the rescue when both were exhausted, and easily captured the combatants and separated them with a straw. Like a well-regulated housekeeper, the wife would soon go to work weaving a fine, brown garb around the innumerable eggs she laid, while the "old man" would spin long yarns up and down the wall, scampering over his growing web with the mathematical precision of a scientific surveyor. He was perfect in all his gossamer lines; and the octagonal shapes that seemingly grew out of his mouth and feet filled me with a nameless surprise. When the mice or the spiders heard footsteps at my door, they would immediately stop play or work and run into their holes, seeming to know that sane man was on his round of ignorance to minister to the insane. But what cared I for the cruelty of man?

"With spiders I had friendship made,
And watched them in their sullen trade;
Had seen the mice by moonlight play,
And why should I feel less than they?
We were all inmates of one place,
And I the monarch of each race."

I gradually gained the liberty of locomotion in my small room, and the attendant that knocked me down, instead of poking my food through the hole in the door, would open it wide, and pass in the victuals with a look of mingled shame and fear. I was nursing my wrath to keep it warm, and cunningly smiled upon the brute, who no doubt imagined that I had forgotten his cruel treatment. There was nothing in the room that I could strike him with, but with the quick device of a lunatic I pulled off one of my iron heel-tap boots, and as he one day approached the door without caution, I swung my boot by the leg and planted the iron heel on his head. He fell like a struck steer, and although he was a powerful man, lay like one dead until companion attendants carried him away. Of course the doctors and attendants bound me up as usual, and upbraided me for nearly killing my keeper. I was perfectly happy, however, in thinking that the punishment he received at my hands was only a just recompense for the secret knocks and blows inflicted upon my fellow lunatics.

Days and weeks wore away, and still my mind rambled in the briers and flowers of imagination. The morning sun rose like a ball of fire, and I followed his track across the heavens until the evening shadows settled down upon the earth, and night flung out her jeweled curtains to flutter in the winds and brighten in the silver light of the moon. How I watched that full, round, harvest moon, as it rose in the month of July, 1860. Luna, my beautiful midnight companion, sent her soft rays through my barred window, and its glorious beams played hide and seek upon the floor, or danced to the music of the zephyrs as they tripped through the leaves and branches of a fine old tree that shaded my lonely cell. I would talk by the hour to imagined spirits, and in the rapture of my soul spin poetry faster than my spiders spun their web. I dashed into flights of eloquence that would have put to blush the ravings of Demosthenes, Mirabeau or Patrick Henry.

Strange to say, while I praised in poetry and lunatic eloquence the greatness of "Harry of the West," his son Theo-

dore was a chattering lunatic by my side, and cheered the flights of fancy that bubbled up in my troubled brain. Theodore Clay had been an inmate of the asylum for thirty years, and was considered in his youth the brightest child of the old statesman. It was said that love and disappointment provoked his lunacy. A beautiful Lexington girl pledged him her hand and heart, but when the nuptial night came round, the groom appeared in all the glow of matrimonial expectations, while the fair bride had eloped with a hated rival. This blow cut the highly wrought strings of intellect, and left but a poor, broken instrument to tune out his mournful days in a lunatic asylum.

It would take a volume to describe the different kinds of lunatics and the various forms that the mind takes on in its ravings. There is the chattering type, as he walks the wards and taps the bars like a caged beast; there is the moody, low-browed man, sitting alone, counting over and over his fingertips or watching the flies and spiders as they buzz and weave in the sunshine. There comes the General, as he strides the halls, commanding large armies and fighting great battles at Pharsalia and Waterloo, who imagines himself Cæsar or Napoleon. There is the King in all his royal glory, carrying a broom for a sceptre and a torn sheet for a purple robe. In the next ward can be seen his royal consort, imitating the strut of Queen Victoria, straws and chicken-feathers in her hair for a royal crown, and a simpering smile for the poor subjects who gaze upon her pretended rank. Now comes the confidential, wise inventor, who will tell you of the great things he has done, of the millions he controls, and the innumerable ships that plough the ocean for his advantage and profit. There is the self-styled Jesus Christ, who preaches forgiveness and salvation, ending with a blessing and general absolution from sin, and asking in return only a bit of tobacco! In fact, the very earth blossoms at his will, and the sun, moon and stars give light at his command. It is only a generous charity that keeps him from shutting up this universal world

and retiring into chaos. There is the beautiful, delicate girl, like a withered lily, humming a low love-song to her darling, who is personated by the pillow in her arms, but who may never again give back the warm kisses that come and go like celestial messengers. See another fair Ophelia, posturing before a looking-glass with comb in hand, and tangled hair, sighing or weeping for a lover or father snatched from her warm embrace. She speaks: "They say the owl was a baker's daughter—Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be." Look at the despair of the weeping mother as she bends over the imaginary body of her babe, sleeping in the shape of a sweet little doll on the broken rocking-chair by her side, impelled backward and forward with the wail of a lost spirit. Gaze on the sailor from the salt sea, swinging to the right and left, heaving the anchor or hauling away hand over hand the never-ending round of imaginary ropes. He strides the ship like a royal Viking, and looks aloft at the whirr of the tackle, sails and ropes, with all the pride of a jolly Jack Tar out on the ocean blue. No blackened bars or brutal attendants hedge in his soul or clip the power of his insane pinions. Like a sea gull, or one of Mother Carey's chickens, he rocks upon the crested wave of freedom, and with a piercing eye scans the horizon or lingers for the night winds to lull him to repose in the cradle of the deep.

The occasional dance and theatrical performance in the hall of a lunatic asylum are events of rare interest to the student of human nature. I have attended these amusements both as an insane and sane spectator, and must say that in the former I felt more joy than in the latter situation. I once took part in the play of the Lady of Lyons, personating the enthusiastic Melnotte, pouring out a flood of wild eloquence at the feet of a fair but unfortunate Pauline. There, indeed, was "a palace lifting to eternal summer—perfumed lights stealing through the midst of alabaster lamps—music from sweet lutes, and murmurs of low fountains that gush forth in the midst of roses." All the warm glow of lunatic fancy was

heaped in my acting, and while Booth, Montagne and McCullough may have rendered the role with more harmony and felicity, they never could approach my earnestness, or touch the lightning flashes of love that shot across my fevered brain.

For a month after my arrival at the asylum I did not sleep an hour. Exhausted nature would now and then doze off into a few moments of delicious delirium, and again the devil of insanity would call up his myriad of royal imps and hold the usual banquet in my brain. I was gradually growing weaker, and the doctors saw that something must be done to force sleep. Doctor Dudley came to my room one morning, talked to me with the kindness of a lover, humored my hallucination, and said that he had a nice cup of coffee for me to drink. From the hands of Dudley everything was taken with confidence and relished with avidity. I drank the so-called coffee given by the doctor, and for the space of seventy-two hours I slept in a semi-conscious state. The *laudanum* did its perfect work; and out of a terrible, awful dream, the piston-rod of lunacy flew back into the cylinder of reason, beginning to move in its accustomed groove. My hot fever had gone, the nerves had relaxed, my voice assumed its natural tone, and tired nature lay like a drooping plant in the mid-day sun.

I soon began to complain of the fearful noise made by the insane, day and night, and craved the privilege of the grounds and a place to sleep far away from the howl of the maniacs. Mr. Littlefield, the genial gardener and farm superintendent, took a particular fancy to me, gave his word to the doctor that I would be quiet outside the walls, and that he would have me help in the garden and among the flowers. I went forth from a close room to the walks, flowers and trees in the beautiful grounds, and in a small brick house, occupied by the gardener, I slept in confidence and peace until the first of September, 1860, when I was pronounced recovered and discharged from the asylum, after a stay of two months and four days!

Twenty-three years have passed since the terrible scenes of my insanity, and yet

‘Remembrance wakes, with all her busy train,
Swells at my breast, and turns the past to pain.
In all my wanderings round this world of care,
In all my griefs, and God has given my share,’—

I still have hopes that life has not been in vain, and that out of my trouble and insane experience may grow the sweet fruits of charity and love, to strengthen and cure the poor, oppressed and unfortunate lunatics who chatter, sing and howl to-day in mad-house miseries.

The feelings of a lunatic are almost indescribable. In my own case, ideas would spring up in my brain with the heat and force of a red-hot shot, sending my body on to some desperate action entirely beyond my power to restrain or subdue. There seemed to be some whispering devil at the threshold of my mind, urging me on to deeds that I knew were wrong, but for my life, had not the power to prevent. I knew what I was doing all the time, and felt inwardly before the act a sense of moral shame at the thing to be committed, and yet could not resist the impulse and seductive advice of the unknown power that rushed me on to spurts of desperation.

Reason waged war against insanity, but some inexplicable, unknown force propelled me into the very jaws of death, at which I smiled with disgust and contempt. My supreme egotism was only equaled by my indifference to life; and while having at times the outward semblance of sanity, the inward fires burned like a furnace, and hurried me on to commit any deed that chanced to pop into my shattered soul.

The rushing swoop of the eagle, the fearful whiz of a north-west blizzard, or the bolt of lightning, are not more fatal in their destination than the spirit pulsations of a lunatic brain. The world whirls around like a circular saw, the rivers run like molten silver, the sun burns a hole in the earth, the moon is filled with crumbling mountains, the stars are sparkling diamonds in some far-off ocean, and mankind

but puppets that appear for a moment and are gone forever to the realm of shadows !

Abolish forever private lunatic asylums, established in fear and cupidity, conducted in fraud on human nature, festering all over with the sores of financial iniquity. Wipe out the county mad-houses, only kept up for the use of some local doctors and petty politicians, who get their bread at the expense of shrieking lunatics. Let the state and the nation take full charge of the insane, establishing spacious buildings and extended grounds, where the most perfect freedom can be given to the body, and where even the mind will not be convinced that it is cut off from the world like an imprisoned felon. Tear out the black bolts that bar the windows, paint in bright, cheerful colors, let clambering vines, blooming flowers, running waters and the song of birds entrance the weary mind, and let the soft sunshine into the black holes and damp dungeons that man has made for man.

Classification, separation and kindness, will tend to cure the insane if there is but a gleam of reason to light up the soul. Force will compel the body, but cannot touch the mind, and the medical fraternity might as well try to dam up the Amazon with green grass as to attempt the cure of the insane with physical terrors. Humor and love, cleanliness, good food, fresh air, and above all, freedom for the body, will make the mind of the madman calm and serene, and bring him back to reason, home and friends.

