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Psychiatrists in 19th-century fiction

Post-Mortem Recollections of a Medical Lecturer (1836), Charles Lever

Fiona Subotsky

Charles Lever was an Anglo-Irishman who trained in medicine at Trinity College, Dublin, and St Steven's Hospital, but turned to writing in order better to support his family and early gambling habit. This extraordinary tale is purportedly written by a medical lecturer who has had an upsetting morning with the death of a patient but then goes on to give a lecture on insanity. As additional stressors, he is late and finds that the lecture theatre is extremely crowded, that an eminent foreign physician is present, and that he has left behind his main notes. Despite doubts, pauses and even repetitions he begins to warm to his theme, indeed words begin to fall 'with ease and rapidity'; he makes his points boldly and clearly, and easily demolishes theories of the past. Then he begins to think of his childhood, and shows that every case of those who died insane had some characteristic of a previous childhood trait, and develops this idea. He becomes more and more excited, and then full of terror:

'A thought rushed like a meteor flash across my brain, and bursting forth into a loud laugh of hysteric passion, I cried – and I, and I – too, am a maniac . . . a cry of horror burst through the room. I know no more'.

When he comes round, he is in bed, presumably having succumbed to the 'brain fever', common in Victorian novels as the result of extreme stress. He tries to respond to the doctor and sit up, but feels a clammy perspiration, hears a rushing sound, suffers convulsive spasms and falls back again. 'It is over at last', the doctor says.

None the less, consciousness returns, though he is unable to move or speak. He knows he is dead, and wonders if it might be a trance, but knows 'all too well the unerring signs of death'. He is placed in a coffin, and friends gather round. He reflects that the processes of death are slow and that maybe, by the power of will, he can revive. He therefore proceeds, in a methodically medical fashion, 'to think upon those nerves which preside over the action of the heart, their origin, their course, their distribution, their relation, their sympathies'. He wills action, but fails at first, and is full of terror that the coffin is about to be closed. However, a dear friend puts his hand on his heart. Our narrator responds, and breathes once more.

There was a peculiarly Victorian fear of being buried alive which was exploited by a number of writers – for instance, Edgar Allan Poe in his story *The Premature Burial* (1844). The verisimilitude of Lever's tale is unusually enhanced by being told in a well-informed medical way, and indeed apparently had a basis in the author's own experience of a severe illness. The tone and mood, however, are notably 'gothic', and intended to induce horror and terror, as is the description of the descent into apparent madness. All this is most unlike the soothing reports of 'near-death experiences' of our own day.

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