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Psychiatrists in 19th-century fiction

Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician (1837), Samuel Warren

Fiona Subotsky

Samuel Warren (1807–1877) was a lawyer who eventually achieved the well-rewarded post of Master of Lunacy with responsibility to adjudicate on the financial affairs of lunatics. When younger, he had also for 6 years 'actively engaged in the practical study of physic', perhaps as apprentice to an apothecary. His many tales, published first in *Blackwood's Magazine*, inspired imitation from Poe, Le Fanu and Dickens, and concentrated on sensational medical case histories, especially including the supernatural, insanity and deathbeds, ideally all three, as below.

In *The Spectre-Smitten*, law student Mr M returns to gloomy Lincoln's Inn after a night of revelry, to find a figure of 'ghastly hue' sitting in his armchair, which then terrifyingly stretches out its arms and approaches. Mr M falls 'senseless on the floor', proceeding to frequent convulsions, twitchings and contortions. He recovers consciousness, but learning that his neighbour died on the night of the apparition becomes convinced he is haunted by him. The physician forms the opinion that Mr M is 'suffering from a very severe congestion of the vessels of the brain', and orders 'copious venesection – his head to be shaven, and covered perpetually with cloths soaked in evaporating lotions – blisters behind his ears and at the nape of the neck – and appropriate internal medicines'. This fails to prevent an attempted murderous assault with a razor after which the patient is put in a strait jacket, strapped to a bed, and removed to an asylum 'reduced to a state of drivelling idiocy – complete fatuity!' Even though Mr M improves somewhat, he is still convinced, despite the physician trying to reason with him, that he is constantly under the watch of a huge boa constrictor. Apparent recovery notwithstanding, he later destroys himself 'in a manner too terrible to mention'.

This is one of the more coherent stories. It is best if the reader can just relax and enjoy shock by shock, hoping that current interventions have made progress.

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