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Remarks On The Life and Writings Of Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin

Orrery, John Boyle of

London, 1752

A letter from Mrs. Whiteway to Lord Orrery, dated November 22. 1742.
describing the melancholy situation of Dr. Swift's health and
understanding.

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Dublin, November 22, 1742.

My LORD,

THE easy manner, in which you reproach me for not acquainting you with the poor Dean's situation, lays a fresh obligation upon me; yet mean as an excuse is for a fault, I shall attempt one to your Lordship, and only for this reason, that you may not think me capable of neglecting any thing you could command me. I told you in my last letter, the Dean's understanding was quite gone, and I feared the farther particulars would only shock the tenderness of your nature, and the melancholy scene make your heart ach, as it has often done mine. I was the last person whom he knew, and when that part of his memory failed, he was so outrageous at seeing any body, that I was forced to leave him, nor could he rest for a night or two after seeing any person: so that all the attendance which I could pay him was calling twice a week to enquire after his health, and to observe that proper care was taken of him, and durst only look at him while his back was towards me, fearing to discompose him. He walked ten hours a day, would not eat or drink if his servant stayed in the room. His meat was served up ready cut, and sometimes it would lie an hour on the table before he would touch it, and then eat it walking. About six weeks ago, in one night's time, his left eye swelled as large as an egg, and the lid Mr. NICHOLS (his surgeon) thought would mortify, and many large boils appeared upon his arms and body. The torture he was in, is not to be described.

scribed. Five persons could scarce hold him for a week from tearing out his own eyes: and, for near a month, he did not sleep two hours in twenty four: yet a moderate appetite continued; and what is more to be wondered at, the last day of his illness, he knew me perfectly well, took me by the hand, called me by my name, and shewed the same pleasure as usual in seeing me. I asked him, if he would give me a dinner? He said, to be sure, my old friend. Thus he continued that day, and knew the Doctor and Surgeon, and all his family so well, that Mr. NICHOLS thought it possible he might return to a share of understanding, so as to be able to call for what he wanted, and to bear some of his old friends to amuse him. But alas! this pleasure to me was but of short duration; for the next day or two it was all over, and proved to be only pain that had roused him. He is now free from torture: his eye almost well; very quiet, and begins to sleep, but cannot, without great difficulty, be prevailed on to walk a turn about his room: and yet in this way the Physicians think he may hold out for some time. I am, my Lord,

Your Lordship's most obedient

humble servant,

M. WHITEWAY.

What a shocking, what a melancholy account is this; of how small estimation must the greatest genius appear in the sight of God!

About

AND WRITINGS OF DR. SWIFT. 91

About a year and a half afterwards, I received a letter from another of his relations, DEANE SWIFT, Esq; in answer to a report, which I had mentioned to him, of Dr. SWIFT's having viewed himself (as he was led across the room) in a glass, and crying out, "O poor old man!" The letter is written long after the Dean had been totally deprived of reason.

Dublin, April 4, 1744.

My LORD,

AS to the story of O poor old man! I enquired into it. The Dean did say something upon his seeing himself in the glass, but neither Mrs. RIDGEWAY, nor the lower servants could tell me what it was he said. I desired them to recollect it, by the time when I should come again to the deanery. I have been there since, they cannot recollect it. A thousand stories have been invented of him within these two years, and imposed upon the world. I thought this might have been one of them: and yet I am now inclined to think, there may be some truth in it: for on Sunday the 17th of March, as he sat in his chair, upon the housekeeper's moving a knife from him as he was going to catch at it, he shrugged his shoulders, and, rocking himself, said, I am what I am, I am what I am: and, about six minutes afterwards, repeated the same words two or three times over.

His servant shaves his cheeks, and all his face as low as the tip of his chin, once a week: but under the chin, and about