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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 dissertation upon idiotism.

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of the people : and as the characteristics change, the inhabitants undergo the same metamorphoses. How different are the modern Italians from the antient Romans ! If BRUTUS were now living, he would probably acquiesce in the depending state of a cardinal, and the papal crown would be unanimously presented to CÆSAR.

The melancholy case of Dr. SWIFT has, I find, seduced me into a long digression : when I am writing to you, my Ham, I give a full scope to my thoughts, and wander licentiously out of my sphere. I aim at placing all observations in your way, which I think can be of any use in your future road of life. But, why talk to you on the melancholy effects of madness ? only, my dear son, to observe in general, that temperance, exercise, philosophy, and true religion, are the surest means to make men happy, and to preserve them from a contagious malady, to which the inhabitants of these kingdoms are unfortunately liable.

A state of idiotism is less deplorable, not less shocking, than that of madness. Idiots are afflicted with no turbulent passions : they are innocent and harmless, and often excite pity, but never occasion fear. The proverb tells us, *They are the favourites of fortune :* but I suppose it alludes only to those fools, *who can number twenty rightly, and can tell the days of the week ;* and alas ! those are no idiots in the eye of the law. The absolute naturals owe their wretchedness to a wrong formation in their brain, or to accidents in their birth, or the dregs of fevers, and other violent distempers. The last was the case of the Dean of St. PATRICK'S, according to

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the account sent me by his two relations Mrs. WHITEWAY, and Mr. SWIFT^a: neither of whom, I think, make the least mention of a deafness, that from time to time attacked the Dean, and rendered him extremely miserable. You will find him complaining of this misfortune in several parts of his writings, especially in his Letters (of the eighth volume) to Dr. SHERIDAN^b. Possibly some internal pressure upon his brain might first have affected the auditory nerves, and then, by degrees, might have encreased, so as entirely to stop up that fountain of ideas, which had before spread itself in the most diffusive, and surprizing manner.

Having just now hinted to you the advantages that have accrued to madmen, I ought not to omit the honours that have been paid to fools. In former ages the courts of France and England were not thought completely embellished without a favourite idiot, who bore the title of the King's Jester, and who was as remarkably distinguished by a cap and bells, as his royal master was distinguished by a diadem and robes. This animal, like JUNIUS BRUTUS, frequently assumed the face and behaviour of folly, to answer his own particular views and advantages. His bluntness and simplicity recommended him in those places, where truths, if spoken by a man of sense, were disagreeable and dangerous. If he had not the honour, like BRUTUS, to save his country, at least he had the happiness to secure himself: and his ex-

^a See page 89, and page 91.

^b See Vol. VIII. page 419.

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pressions were often so full of humour and sarcasm, that, to this day, they are recorded as pieces of wit. Such was the famous reply of ARCHY to King JAMES the first, when his Majesty, amidst all his wisdom, was sufficiently inspired with folly, to send his only son into Spain. But, fools at present are no longer admired in courts, or, if they are, they appear there without their cap and bells.

And now, my dear HAMILTON, to quit reflections, that tend in general rather to terrify, than to improve your understanding, let me observe, in honour of my friend SWIFT, that his establishment of an hospital for idiots and lunatics, is remarkably generous: as the unhappy persons, who receive the benefit, must, for ever, remain insensible of their benefactor.

I am your affectionate Father,

O R R E R Y.



LETTER XXII.

*T*HE *Directions to Servants*, which is the tract immediately following SWIFT's *Will*, is imperfect and unfinished. The editor tells us, that a preface and a dedication were to have been added to it. I think it was not published till after the Dean's death; but I remember the manuscript handed about, and much applauded,