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NEUROLOGY IN LITERATURE

Amnesia

Amnesia that includes the loss of memory for personal details seldom causes the neurologist diagnostic difficulty. The condition is not related to organic brain disease and it is perhaps surprising that novelists continue to regard it as such. Sometimes, as for example with Saki, the problem is pursued for its comic possibilities. The whole of Rebecca West's novel, *The return of the soldier*, is constructed around the premise of memory loss for personal affairs. Dickens's characterisation is curious in that Dr Manette appears to retain some insight into his behaviour; one would almost consider the problem to be one of malingering, though clearly that was never Dickens's intention.

Charles Dickens, 1859, A tale of two cities

Miss Pross, with a terrified face, was at his ear. "O me, O me, all is lost!" cried she, wringing her hands. "What is to be told to Ladybird? He doesn't know me, and is making shoes!" . . . "Doctor Manette. My dear friend, Doctor Manette!" The Doctor looked at him for a moment—half enquiringly, half as if he were angry at being spoken to—and bent over his work again.

So far as it was possible to comprehend him without overstepping those delicate and gradual approaches which Mr. Lorry felt to be the only safe advance, he at first supposed that his daughter's marriage had taken place yesterday. An incidental allusion, purposely thrown out, to the day of the week, and the day of the month, set him thinking and counting, and evidently made him uneasy. In all other respects, however, he was so composedly himself, that Mr. Lorry determined to have the aid he sought. And that aid was his own.

"My dear Manette, it is the case of an old and prolonged shock, of great acuteness and severity to the affections, the feelings, the—the—as you express it—the mind. The mind. It is the case of a shock under which the sufferer was borne down, one cannot say for how long, because I believe he cannot calculate the time himself, and there are no other means for getting at it. It is the case of a shock from which the sufferer recovered, by a process that he cannot trace himself—but, unfortunately, there has been"—he paused and took a deep breath—"a slight relapse."

George Eliot, 1860, The mill on the floss

"Dr. Turnbull thought him a deal better this morn-

ing," said Mrs Tulliver; "he took more notice, and spoke to me—but he's never known Tom yet—looks at the poor lad as if he was a stranger, though he said something once about Tom and the pony. The doctor says his memory's gone a long way back, and he doesn't know Tom because he's thinking of him when he was little."

Saki, 1914, A holiday task

"It is a curious thing," said the young woman, "that I should be able to tell you the name of those roses without an effort of memory, because if you were to ask me my name I should be utterly unable to give it to you." . . .

"Yes," answered the lady, "I suppose it is a case of partial loss of memory. I was in the train coming down here; my ticket told me that I had come from Victoria and was bound for this place. I had a couple of five-pound notes and a sovereign on me, no visiting cards or any other means of identification, and no idea as to who I am. I can only hazily recollect that I have a title; I am a Lady Somebody—beyond that my mind is a blank." . . .

"Yes, she's the Lady Champion at golf in my part of the world. An awful good sort, and goes about a good deal in Society, but she has an awkward habit of losing her memory every now and then, and gets into all sorts of fixes."

Saki, 1923, The disappearance of Crispina Umberleigh

Her wandering away had been caused by a sudden and complete loss of memory. She usually dressed in the style of a superior kind of charwoman, and it was not so very surprising that she was one, and still less that people should accept her statement and help her to get to work. . . . It was the shock of being patronisingly addressed as "my good woman" by a curate, who was disputing with her where the stove should be placed in a parish concert hall, that led to her sudden restoration of her memory. "I think you forget who you are speaking to," she observed crushingly, which was rather unduly severe, considering she had only just remembered it herself.

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