Thomas De Quincey

CONFESSIONS OF AN ENGLISH OPIUM EATER

Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859) was an English essayist. Orphaned at a young age and sent away to school, he was successful but bored and soon ran away. His Autobiographic Sketches give a vivid picture of his early years at the family residence, and show him as a highly imaginative and over-sensitive child, suffering hard things at the hands of a tyrannical elder brother.

When he was twenty-eight De Quincey began to use opium (mixed with alcohol in the form of laudanum) regularly to treat his severe stomach pains. Though his intake was moderate at first, he soon became addicted. At first he rationalized the use of the drug. Later, he experienced opium-induced stupors in which he could not distinguish dream from reality nor note the passage of time.

He also developed memory loss and long periods of depression. He resolved to wean himself from the drug and did so, although in the final version (1856) of this memoir he admits to having slipped back into addiction a number of times.

De Quincey stands among the great masters of style in the language. In his greatest passages, the cadence of his elaborately piled-up sentences falls like cathedral music, or gives an abiding expression to the fleeting pictures of his most gorgeous dreams. His character unfortunately bore no correspondence to his intellectual endowments. His moral system had in fact been shattered by indulgence in opium. His appearance and manners have been thus described: “A short and fragile, but well-proportioned frame; a shapely and compact head; a face beaming with intellectual light, with rare, almost feminine beauty of feature and complexion; a fascinating courtesy of manner, and a fulness, swiftness, and elegance of silvery speech.”

I have often been asked how I first came to be a regular opium-eater, and have suffered, very unjustly, in the opinion of my acquaintance from being reputed to have brought upon myself all the sufferings which I shall have to record, by a long course of indulgence in this practice purely for the sake of creating an artificial state of pleasurable excitement. This, however, is a misrepresentation of my case. True it is that for nearly ten years I did occasionally take opium for the sake of the exquisite pleasure it gave me; but so long as I took it with this view I was effectually protected from all material bad consequences by the necessity of interposing long intervals between the several acts of indulgence, in order to renew the pleasurable sensations. It was not for the purpose of creating pleasure, but of mitigating pain in the severest degree, that I first began to use opium as an article of daily diet. In the twenty-eighth year of my age a most painful affection of the stomach, which I had first experienced about ten years before, attacked me in great strength. This affection had originally been caused by extremities of hunger, suffered in my boyish days. During the season of hope and redundant happiness which succeeded (that is, from eighteen to twenty-four) it had slumbered; for the three following years it had revived at intervals; and now, under unfavourable circumstances, from depression of spirits, it attacked me with a violence that yielded to no remedies but opium. As the youthful sufferings which first produced this derangement of the stomach were interesting in themselves, and in the circumstances that attended them, I shall here briefly retrace them.

My father died when I was about seven years old, and left me to the care of four guardians. I was sent to various schools, great and small; and was very early distinguished for my classical attainments, especially for my knowledge of Greek. At thirteen I wrote Greek with ease; and at fifteen my command of that language was so great that I not only composed Greek verses in
lyric metres, but could converse in Greek fluently and without embarrassment—an accomplishment which I have not since met with in any scholar of my times, and which in my case was owing to the practice of daily reading off the newspapers into the best Greek I could furnish _extempore_; for the necessity of ransacking my memory and invention for all sorts and combinations of periphrastic expressions as equivalents for modern ideas, images, relations of things, &c., gave me a compass of diction which would never have been called out by a dull translation of moral essays, &c. "That boy," said one of my masters, pointing the attention of a stranger to me, "that boy could harangue an Athenian mob better than you and I could address an English one." He who honoured me with this eulogy was a scholar, "and a ripe and a good one," and of all my tutors was the only one whom I loved or reverenced. Unfortunately for me (and, as I afterwards learned, to this worthy man's great indignation), I was transferred to the care, first of a blockhead, who was in a perpetual panic lest I should expose his ignorance; and finally to that of a respectable scholar at the head of a great school on an ancient foundation. This man had been appointed to his situation by — College, Oxford, and was a sound, well-built scholar, but (like most men whom I have known from that college) coarse, clumsy, and inelegant. A miserable contrast he presented, in my eyes, to the Etonian brilliancy of my favourite master; and beside, he could not disguise from my hourly notice the poverty and meagreness of his understanding. It is a bad thing for a boy to be and to know himself far beyond his tutors, whether in knowledge or in power of mind.

THE PLEASURES OF OPIUM

It is so long since I first took opium, that if it had been a trifling incident in my life, I might have forgotten its date: but cardinal events are not to be forgotten; and, from circumstances connected with it, I remember that it must be referred to the autumn of 1804. During that season I was in London, having come thither for the first time since my entrance at college. And my introduction to opium arose in the following way: From an early age I had been accustomed to wash my head in cold water at least once a day; being suddenly seized with tooth-ache, I attributed it to some relaxation caused by an accidental intermission of that practice; jumped out of bed, plunged my head into a bason of cold water, and, with hair thus wetted, went to sleep. The next morning, as I need hardly say, I awoke with excruciating rheumatic pains of the head and face, from which I had hardly any respite for about twenty days. On the twenty-first day I think it was, and on a Sunday, that I went out into the streets; rather to run away, if possible, from my torments, than with any distinct purpose. By accident, I met a college acquaintance, who recommended opium. Opium! dread agent of unimaginable pleasure and pain! I had heard of it as I had heard of manna or of Ambrosia, but no further; how unmeaning a sound was it at that time! what solemn chords does it now strike upon my heart! what heart-quaking vibrations of sad and happy remembrances! Reverting for a moment to these, I feel a mystic importance attached to the minutest circumstances connected with the place, and the time, and the man (if man he was), that first laid open to me the paradise of opium-eaters. It was a Sunday afternoon, wet and cheerless; and a duller spectacle this earth of ours has not to show than a rainy Sunday in London. My road homewards lay through Oxford Street; and near "the stately Pantheon," (as Mr. Wordsworth has obligingly called it) I saw a druggist's shop. The druggist (unconscious minister of celestial pleasures!), as if in sympathy with the rainy Sunday, looked dull and stupid, just as any mortal druggist might be expected to look on a Sunday; and when I asked for the tincture of opium, he gave it to me as any other man might do! and, furthermore, out of my shilling returned me what seemed to be a real copper halfpenny, taken out of a real wooden drawer. Nevertheless, in spite of such indications of humanity, he has ever since existed in my mind as the beatific vision of an immortal druggist sent down to earth on a special mission to myself. And it confirms me in this way of
considering him, that when I next came up to London, I sought him near the stately Pantheon, and found him not; and thus to me, who knew not his name (if, indeed he had one) he seemed rather to have vanished from Oxford Street than to have removed in any bodily fashion. The reader may choose to think of him as, possibly, no more than a sublunary druggist: it may be so, but my faith is better: I believe him to have evanesced, or evaporated. So unwillingly would I connect any mortal remembrances with that hour, and place, and creature, that first brought me acquainted with the celestial drug.

Arrived at my lodgings, it may be supposed that I lost not a moment in taking the quantity prescribed. I was necessarily ignorant of the whole art and mystery of opium-taking; and what I took, I took under every disadvantage. But I took it; and in an hour, — oh heavens! what a revulsion! what an upheaving, from its lowest depths, of the inner spirit! what an apocalypse of the world within me! That my pains had vanished, was now a trifle in my eyes; this negative effect was swallowed up in the immensity of those positive effects which had opened before me, in the abyss of divine enjoyment thus suddenly revealed. Here was a panacea, a , for all human woes; here was the secret of happiness, about which philosophers had disputed for so many ages, at once discovered; happiness might now be bought for a penny, and carried in the waistcoat pocket; portable ecstasies might be had corked up in a pint bottle; and peace of mind could be sent down in gallons by the mail-coach. But, if I talk in this way, the reader will think I am laughing; and I can assure him, that nobody will laugh long who deals much with opium; its pleasures even are of a grave and solemn complexion; and, in his happiest state, the opium-eater cannot present himself in the character of L'Allegro; even then, he speaks and thinks as becomes II Penseroso. Nevertheless, I have a very reprehensible way of jesting, at times, in the midst of my own misery; and, unless when I am checked by some more powerful feelings, I am afraid I shall be guilty of this indecent practice, even in these annals of suffering or enjoyment. The reader must allow a little to my infirm nature in this respect; and with a few indulgences of that sort, I shall endeavour to be as grave, if not drowsy, as fits a theme like opium, so anti-mercurial as it really is, and so drowsy as it is falsely reputed.

And, first, one word with respect to its bodily effects; for upon all that has been hitherto written on the subject of opium, whether by travellers in Turkey (who may plead their privilege of lying as an old immemorial right) or by professors of medicine, writing ex cathedrâ, I have but one emphatic criticism to pronounce, — Lies! lies! lies! I remember once, in passing a book-stall, to have caught these words from a page of some satiric author: "By this time I became convinced that the London newspapers spoke truth at least twice a week, namely, on Tuesday and Saturday, and might safely be depended upon for — the list of bankrupts." In like manner, I do by no means deny that some truths have been delivered to the world in regard to opium; thus, it has been repeatedly affirmed, by the learned, that opium is a dusky brown in colour, — and this, take notice, I grant, — secondly, that it is rather dear, which also I grant — for, in my time, East India opium has been three guineas a pound, and Turkey, eight; and, thirdly, that if you eat a good deal of it most probably you must do what is particularly disagreeable to any man of regular habits, namely, — die. [2] These weighty propositions are, all and singular, true; I cannot gainsay them; and truth ever was, and will be, commendable. But, in these three theorems, I believe we have exhausted the stock of knowledge as yet accumulated by man on the subject of opium. And, therefore, worthy doctors, as there seems to be room for further discoveries, stand aside, and allow me to come forward and lecture on this matter.

First, then, it is not so much affirmed as taken for granted, by all who ever mention opium, formally or incidentally, that it does or can produce intoxication. Now, reader, assure yourself, meo periculo, that no quantity of opium ever did, or could, intoxicate. As to the tincture of
opium (commonly called laudanum) that might certainly intoxicate, if a man could bear to take
enough of it; but why? because it contains so much proof spirit, and not because it contains so
much opium. But crude opium, I affirm peremptorily, is incapable of producing any state of
body at all resembling that which is produced by alcohol; and not in degree only incapable, but
even in kind; it is not in the quantity of its effects merely, but in the quality, that it differs
altogether. The pleasure given by wine is always mounting, and tending to a crisis, after which
it declines; that from opium, when once generated, is stationary for eight or ten hours: the first,
to borrow a technical distinction from medicine, is a case of acute, the second of chronic,
pleasure; the one is a flame, the other a steady and equable glow. But the main distinction lies
in this, that whereas wine disorders the mental faculties, opium, on the contrary (if taken in a
proper manner), introduces amongst them the most exquisite order, legislation, and harmony.
Wine robs a man of his self-possession; opium greatly invigorates it. Wine unsettles and clouds
the judgment, and gives a preternatural brightness, and a vivid exaltation to the contempts and
the admirations, to the loves and the hatreds, of the drinker; opium, on the contrary,
communicates serenity and equipoise to all the faculties, active or passive; and with respect to
the temper and moral feelings in general, it gives simply that sort of vital warmth which is
approved by the judgment, and which would probably always accompany a bodily constitution
of primeval or antediluvian health. Thus, for instance, opium, like wine, gives an expansion to
the heart and the benevolent affections; but then, with this remarkable difference, that in the
sudden development of kindheartedness which accompanies inebriation, there is always more
or less of a maudlin character which exposes it to the contempt of the bystander. Men shake
hands, swear eternal friendship, and shed tears, — no mortal knows why; and the sensual
creature is clearly uppermost. But the expansion of the benigner feelings, incident to opium, is
no febrile access, but a healthy restoration to that state which the mind would naturally
recover upon the removal of any deep-seated irritation of pain that had disturbed and
quarrelled with the impulses of a heart originally just and good. True it is, that even wine, up
to a certain point, and with certain men, rather tends to exalt and to steady the intellect; I
myself, who have never been a great wine-drinker, used to find that half-a-dozen glasses of
wine advantageously affected the faculties, brightened and intensified the consciousness, and
gave to the mind a feeling of being "ponderibus librata suis;" and certainly it is most absurdly
said, in popular language, of any man, that he is disguised in liquor; for, on the contrary, most
men are disguised by sobriety; and it is when they are drinking (as some old gentleman says in
Athenæus), that men display themselves in their true complexion of character; which surely is
not disguising themselves. But still, wine constantly leads a man to the brink of absurdity and
extravagance; and, beyond a certain point, it is sure to volatilize and to disperse the intellectual
energies; whereas opium always seems to compose what had been agitated, and to concentrate
what had been distracted. In short, to sum up all in one word, a man who is inebriated, or
tending to inebriation, is, and feels that he is, in a condition which calls up into supremacy the
merely human, too often the brutal, part of his nature; but the opium-eater (I speak of him who
is not suffering from any disease, or other remote effects of opium) feels that the diviner part
of his nature is paramount; that is, the moral affections are in a state of cloudless serenity; and
over all is the great light of the majestic intellect.

Having dwelt so much on this first and leading error in respect to opium, I shall notice very
briefly a second and a third; which are, that the elevation of spirits produced by opium is
necessarily followed by a proportionate depression, and that the natural and even immediate
consequence of opium is torpor and stagnation, animal and mental. The first of these errors I
shall content myself with simply denying; assuring my reader, that for ten years, during which
I took opium at intervals, the day succeeding to that on which I allowed myself this luxury was
always a day of unusually good spirits.
With respect to the torpor supposed to follow, or rather (if we were to credit the numerous pictures of Turkish opium-eaters) to accompany the practice of opium-eating, I deny that also. Certainly, opium is classed under the head of narcotics, and some such effect it may produce in the end; but the primary effects of opium are always, and in the highest degree, to excite and stimulate the system; this first stage of its action always lasted with me, during my novitiate, for upwards of eight hours; so that it must be the fault of the opium-eater himself, if he does not so time his exhibition of the dose (to speak medically) as that the whole weight of its narcotic influence may descend upon his sleep. Turkish opium-eaters, it seems, are absurd enough to sit, like so many equestrian statues, on logs of wood as stupid as themselves. But that the reader may judge of the degree in which opium is likely to stupify the faculties of an Englishman, I shall (by way of treating the question illustratively, rather than argumentively) describe the way in which I myself often passed an opium evening in London, during the period between 1804 and 1812. It will be seen, that at least opium did not move me to seek solitude, and much less to seek inactivity, or the torpid state of self-involution ascribed to the Turks. I give this account at the risk of being pronounced a crazy enthusiast or visionary; but I regard that little. I must desire my reader to bear in mind, that I was a hard student, and at severe studies for all the rest of my time; and certainly I had a right occasionally to relaxations as well as the other people; these, however, I allowed myself but seldom.

The late Duke of Norfolk used to say, "Next Friday, by the blessing of Heaven, I purpose to be drunk;" and in like manner I used to fix beforehand how often, within a given time, and when, I would commit a debauch of opium. This was seldom more than once in three weeks; for at that time I could not have ventured to call every day (as I did afterwards) for "a glass of laudanum negus, warm, and without sugar." No; as I have said, I seldom drank laudanum, at that time, more than once in three weeks: this was usually on a Tuesday or a Saturday night; my reason for which was this. In those days, Grassini sang at the Opera, and her voice was delightful to me beyond all that I had ever heard. I know not what may be the state of the opera-house now, having never been within its walls for seven or eight years; but at that time it was by much the most pleasant place of public resort in London for passing an evening. Five shillings admitted one to the gallery, which was subject to far less annoyance than the pit of the theatres; the orchestra was distinguished by its sweet and melodious grandeur, from all English orchestras, the composition of which, I confess, is not acceptable to my ear, from the predominance of the clangorous instruments, and the absolute tyranny of the violin. The choruses were divine to hear; and when Grassini appeared in some interlude, as she often did, and poured forth her passionate soul as Andromache, at the tomb of Hector, etc., I question whether any Turk, of all that ever entered the paradise of opium-eaters, can have had half the pleasure I had. But, indeed, I honour the Barbarians too much by supposing them capable of any pleasures approaching to the intellectual ones of an Englishman. For music is an intellectual or a sensual pleasure, according to the temperament of him who hears it. And, by the bye, with the exception of the fine extravaganza on that subject in "Twelfth Night," I do not recollect more than one thing said adequately on the subject of music in all literature; it is a passage in the Religio Medici[4] of Sir T. Browne; and, though chiefly remarkable for its sublimity, has also a philosophic value, inasmuch as it points to the true theory of musical effects. The mistake of most people is, to suppose that it is by the ear they communicate with music, and therefore that they are purely passive to its effects. But this is not so; it is by the reaction of the mind upon the notices of the ear (the matter coming by the senses, the form from the mind) that the pleasure is constructed; and therefore it is that people of equally good ear differ so much in this point from one another. Now, opium, by greatly increasing the activity of the mind, generally increases, of necessity, that particular mode of its activity by which we are able to construct out of the raw material of organic sound an elaborate intellectual pleasure. But, says a friend, a succession of musical sounds is to me like a collection of Arabic characters: I can attach no
ideas to them. Ideas! my good sir? there is no occasion for them! all that class of ideas which
can be available in such a case has a language of representative feelings. But this is a subject
foreign to my present purposes; it is sufficient to say, that a chorus, etc., of elaborate harmony,
displayed before me, as in a piece of arras-work, the whole of my past life, — not as if recalled
by an act of memory, but as if present and incarnated in the music; no longer painful to dwell
upon, but the detail of its incidents removed, or blended in some hazy abstraction, and its
passions exalted, spiritualized, and sublimed. All this was to be had for five shillings. And over
and above the music of the stage and the orchestra, I had all around me, in the intervals of the
performance, the music of the Italian language talked by Italian women, — for the gallery was
usually crowded with Italians, — and I listened with a pleasure such as that with which Weld,
the traveller, lay and listened, in Canada, to the sweet laughter of Indian women; for the less
you understand of a language, the more sensible you are to the melody or harshness of its
sounds. For such a purpose, therefore, it was an advantage to me that I was a poor Italian
scholar, reading it but little, and not speaking it at all, nor understanding a tenth part of what I
heard spoken.

Thus I have shown that opium does not, of necessity, produce inactivity or torpor; but that, on
the contrary, it often led me into markets and theatres. Yet, in candour, I will admit that
markets and theatres are not the appropriate haunts of the opium-eater, when in the divinest
state incident to his enjoyment. In that state, crowds become an oppression to him; music, even,
too sensual and gross. He naturally seeks solitude and silence, as indispensable conditions of
those trances, or profoundest reveries, which are the crown and consummation of what opium
can do for human nature. I, whose disease it was to meditate too much and to observe too little,
and who, upon my first entrance at college, was nearly falling into a deep melancholy, from
brooding too much on the sufferings which I had witnessed in London, was sufficiently aware
of the tendencies of my own thoughts to do all I could to counteract them. I was, indeed, like a
person who, according to the old legend, had entered the cave of Trophonius; and the remedies
I sought were to force myself into society, and to keep my understanding in continual activity
upon matters of science. But for these remedies, I should certainly have become
hypochondriacally melancholy. In after years, however, when my cheerfulness was more fully
re-established, I yielded to my natural inclination for a solitary life. And at that time I often fell
into these reveries upon taking opium; and more than once it has happened to me, on a summer
night, when I have been at an open window, in a room from which I could overlook the sea at a
mile below me, and could command a view of the great town of Liverpool, at about the same
distance, that I have sat, from sunrise to sunset, motionless, and without wishing to move.

I shall be charged with mysticism, Behmenism, quietism, etc.; but that shall not alarm me. Sir
H. Vane, the younger, was one of our wisest men; and let my readers see if he, in his
philosophical works, be half as unmystical as I am. I say, then, that it has often struck me that
the scene itself was somewhat typical of what took place in such a reverie. The town of
Liverpool represented the earth, with its sorrows and its graves left behind, yet not out of
sight, nor wholly forgotten. The ocean, in everlasting but gentle agitation, and brooded over
by dove-like calm, might not unfitly typify the mind, and the mood which then swayed it. For it
seemed to me as if then first I stood at a distance, and aloof from the uproar of life; as if the
tumult, the fever, and the strife, were suspended; a respite granted from the secret burdens of
the heart; a sabbath of repose; a resting from human labours. Here were the hopes which
blossom in the paths of life, reconciled with the peace which is in the grave; motions of the
intellect as unwearied as the heavens, yet for all anxieties a halcyon calm; a tranquility that
seemed no product of inertia, but as if resulting from mighty and equal antagonisms; infinite
activities, infinite repose.
O just, subtle, and mighty opium! that to the hearts of poor and rich alike, for the wounds that will never heal, and for "the pangs that tempt the spirit to rebel," bringest and assuaging balm; -- eloquent opium! that with thy potent rhetoric steal est away the purposes of wrath, and, to the guilty man, for one night givest back the hopes of his youth, and hands washed pure from blood; and, to the proud man, a brief oblivion for

Wrongs unredressed, and insults unavenged;

that summonest to the chancery of dreams, for the triumphs of suffering innocence, false witnesses, and confoundest perjury, and dost reverse the sentences of unrighteous judges; thou buildest upon the bosom of darkness, out of the fantastic imagery of the brain, cities and temples, beyond the art of Phidias and Praxiteles, -- beyond the splendour of Babylon and Hekatompylos; and, "from the anarchy of dreaming sleep," callest into sunny light the faces of long-buried beauties, and the blessed household countenances, cleansed from the "dishonours of the grave." Thou only givest these gifts to man; and thou hast the keys of Paradise, oh just, subtle, and mighty opium!

INTRODUCTION TO THE PAINS OF OPIUM

Courteous, and I hope indulgent, reader (for all my readers must be indulgent ones, or else I fear I shall shock them too much to count on their courtesy), having accompanied me thus far, now let me request you to move onwards for about eight years; that is to say, from 1804 (when I have said that my acquaintance with opium first began) to 1812. The years of academic life are now over and gone—almost forgotten; the student's cap no longer presses my temples; if my cap exist at all, it presses those of some youthful scholar, I trust, as happy as myself, and as passionate a lover of knowledge. . . . Yes; but what else? Why reader, in 1812, the year we are now arrived at, as well as for some years previous, I have been chiefly studying German metaphysics in the writings of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, &c. And how and in what manner do I live?—in short, what class or description of men do I belong to? I am at this period—viz. in 1812—living in a cottage and with a single female servant (honi soit qui mal y pense), who amongst my neighbours passes by the name of my "housekeeper." And as a scholar and a man of learned education, and in that sense a gentleman, I may presume to class myself as an unworthy member of that indefinite body called gentlemen. Partly on the ground I have assigned perhaps, partly because from my having no visible calling or business, it is rightly judged that I must be living on my private fortune; I am so classed by my neighbours; and by the courtesy of modern England I am usually addressed on letters, &c., "Esquire," though having, I fear, in the rigorous construction of heralds, but slender pretensions to that distinguished honour; yet in popular estimation I am X. Y. Z., Esquire, but not justice of the Peace nor Custos Rotulorum. Am I married? Not yet. And I still take opium? On Saturday nights. And perhaps have taken it unblushingly ever since "the rainy Sunday," and "the stately Pantheon," and "the beatific druggist" of 1804? Even so. And how do I find my health after all this opium-eating? In short, how do I do? Why, pretty well, I thank you, reader; in the phrase of ladies in the straw, "as well as can be expected." In fact, if I dared to say the real and simple truth, though, to satisfy the theories of medical men, I ought to be ill, I never was better in my life than in the spring of 1812; and I hope sincerely that the quantity of claret, port, or "particular Madeira," which in all probability you, good reader, have taken, and design to take for every term of eight years during your natural life, may as little disorder your health as mine was disordered by the opium I had taken for eight years, between 1804 and 1812.
[THE MALAY INCIDENT]

Now, then, I was again happy; I now took only 1000 drops of laudanum per day; and what was that? A latter spring had come to close up the season of youth; my brain performed its functions as healthily as ever before; I read Kant again, and again I understood him, or fancied that I did. Again my feelings of pleasure expanded themselves to all around me; and if any man from Oxford or Cambridge, or from neither, had been announced to me in my unpretending cottage, I should have welcomed him with as sumptuous a reception as so poor a man could offer. Whatever else was wanting to a wise man’s happiness, of laudanum I would have given him as much as he wished, and in a golden cup. And, by the way, now that I speak of giving laudanum away, I remember about this time a little incident, which I mention because, trifling as it was, the reader will soon meet it again in my dreams, which it influenced more fearfully than could be imagined. One day a Malay knocked at my door. What business a Malay could have to transact amongst English mountains I cannot conjecture; but possibly he was on his road to a seaport about forty miles distant.

The servant who opened the door to him was a young girl, born and bred amongst the mountains, who had never seen an Asiatic dress of any sort; his turban therefore confounded her not a little; and as it turned out that his attainments in English were exactly of the same extent as hers in the Malay, there seemed to be an impassable gulf fixed between all communication of ideas, if either party had happened to possess any. In this dilemma, the girl, recollecting the reputed learning of her master (and doubtless giving me credit for a knowledge of all the languages of the earth besides perhaps a few of the lunar ones), came and gave me to understand that there was a sort of demon below, whom she clearly imagined that my art could exorcise from the house. I did not immediately go down, but when I did, the group which presented itself, arranged as it was by accident, though not very elaborate, took hold of my fancy and my eye in a way that none of the statuesque attitudes exhibited in the ballets at the Opera-house, though so ostentatiously complex, had ever done. In a cottage kitchen, but panelled on the wall with dark wood that from age and rubbing resembled oak, and looking more like a rustic hall of entrance than a kitchen, stood the Malay—his turban and loose trousers of dingy white relieved upon the dark panelling. He had placed himself nearer to the girl than she seemed to relish, though her native spirit of mountain intrepidity contended with the feeling of simple awe which her countenance expressed as she gazed upon the tiger-cat before her. And a more striking picture there could not be imagined than the beautiful English face of the girl, and its exquisite fairness, together with her erect and independent attitude, contrasted with the sallow and bilious skin of the Malay, enamelled or veneered with mahogany by marine air, his small, fierce, restless eyes, thin lips, slavish gestures and adorations. Half-hidden by the ferocious-looking Malay was a little child from a neighbouring cottage who had crept in after him, and was now in the act of reverting its head and gazing upwards at the turban and the fiery eyes beneath it, whilst with one hand he caught at the dress of the young woman for protection. My knowledge of the Oriental tongues is not remarkably extensive, being indeed confined to two words—the Arabic word for barley and the Turkish for opium (madjoon), which I have learned from Anastasius; and as I had neither a Malay dictionary nor even Adelung’s Mithridates, which might have helped me to a few words, I addressed him in some lines from the Iliad, considering that, of such languages as I possessed, Greek, in point of longitude, came geographically nearest to an Oriental one. He worshipped me in a most devout manner, and replied in what I suppose was Malay. In this way I saved my reputation with my neighbours, for the Malay had no means of betraying the secret. He lay down upon the floor for about an hour, and then pursued his journey. On his departure I presented him with a piece of opium. To him, as an Orientalist, I concluded that opium must be familiar; and the expression of his face convinced me that it was. Nevertheless, I was struck
with some little consternation when I saw him suddenly raise his hand to his mouth, and, to use the schoolboy phrase, bolt the whole, divided into three pieces, at one mouthful. The quantity was enough to kill three dragoons and their horses, and I felt some alarm for the poor creature; but what could be done? I had given him the opium in compassion for his solitary life, on recollecting that if he had travelled on foot from London it must be nearly three weeks since he could have exchanged a thought with any human being. I could not think of violating the laws of hospitality by having him seized and drenched with an emetic, and thus frightening him into a notion that we were going to sacrifice him to some English idol. No: there was clearly no help for it. He took his leave, and for some days I felt anxious, but as I never heard of any Malay being found dead, I became convinced that he was used to opium; and that I must have done him the service I designed by giving him one night of respite from the pains of wandering.

This incident I have digressed to mention, because this Malay (partly from the picturesque exhibition he assisted to frame, partly from the anxiety I connected with his image for some days) fastened afterwards upon my dreams, and brought other Malays with him, worse than himself, that ran “a-muck” at me, and led me into a world of troubles.

THE PAINS OF OPIUM

Reader, who have thus far accompanied me, I must request your attention to a brief explanatory note on three points:

1. For several reasons I have not been able to compose the notes for this part of my narrative into any regular and connected shape. I give the notes disjointed as I find them, or have now drawn them up from memory. Some of them point to their own date, some I have dated, and some are undated. Whenever it could answer my purpose to transplant them from the natural or chronological order, I have not scrupled to do so. Sometimes I speak in the present, sometimes in the past tense. Few of the notes, perhaps, were written exactly at the period of time to which they relate; but this can little affect their accuracy, as the impressions were such that they can never fade from my mind. Much has been omitted. I could not, without effort, constrain myself to the task of either recalling, or constructing into a regular narrative, the whole burthen of horrors which lies upon my brain. This feeling partly I plead in excuse, and partly that I am now in London, and am a helpless sort of person, who cannot even arrange his own papers without assistance; and I am separated from the hands which are wont to perform for me the offices of an amanuensis.

2. You will think perhaps that I am too confidential and communicative of my own private history. It may be so. But my way of writing is rather to think aloud, and follow my own humours, than much to consider who is listening to me; and if I stop to consider what is proper to be said to this or that person, I shall soon come to doubt whether any part at all is proper. The fact is, I place myself at a distance of fifteen or twenty years ahead of this time, and suppose myself writing to those who will be interested about me hereafter; and wishing to have some record of time, the entire history of which no one can know but myself, I do it as fully as I am able with the efforts I am now capable of making, because I know not whether I can ever find time to do it again.

3. It will occur to you often to ask, why did I not release myself from the horrors of opium by leaving it off or diminishing it? To this I must answer briefly: it might be supposed that I yielded to the fascinations of opium too easily; it cannot be supposed that any man can be charmed by its terrors. The reader may be sure, therefore, that I made attempts innumerable
to reduce the quantity. I add, that those who witnessed the agonies of those attempts, and not myself, were the first to beg me to desist. But could not have I reduced it a drop a day, or, by adding water, have bisected or trisected a drop? A thousand drops bisected would thus have taken nearly six years to reduce, and that way would certainly not have answered. But this is a common mistake of those who know nothing of opium experimentally; I appeal to those who do, whether it is not always found that down to a certain point it can be reduced with ease and even pleasure, but that after that point further reduction causes intense suffering. Yes, say many thoughtless persons, who know not what they are talking of, you will suffer a little low spirits and dejection for a few days. I answer, no; there is nothing like low spirits; on the contrary, the mere animal spirits are uncommonly raised: the pulse is improved: the health is better. It is not there that the suffering lies. It has no resemblance to the sufferings caused by renouncing wine. It is a state of unutterable irritation of stomach (which surely is not much like dejection), accompanied by intense perspirations, and feelings such as I shall not attempt to describe without more space at my command.

I shall now enter in medias res, and shall anticipate, from a time when my opium pains might be said to be at their acmé, an account of their palsying effects on the intellectual faculties.

I have thus described and illustrated my intellectual torpor in terms that apply more or less to every part of the four years during which I was under the Circean spells of opium. But for misery and suffering, I might indeed be said to have existed in a dormant state. I seldom could prevail on myself to write a letter; an answer of a few words to any that I received was the utmost that I could accomplish, and often that not until the letter had lain weeks or even months on my writing-table. Without the aid of M. all records of bills paid or to be paid must have perished, and my whole domestic economy, whatever became of Political Economy, must have gone into irretrievable confusion. I shall not afterwards allude to this part of the case. It is one, however, which the opium-eater will find, in the end, as oppressive and tormenting as any other, from the sense of incapacity and feebleness, from the direct embarrassments incident to the neglect or procrastination of each day's appropriate duties, and from the remorse which must often exasperate the stings of these evils to a reflective and conscientious mind. The opium-eater loses none of his moral sensibilities or aspirations. He wishes and longs as earnestly as ever to realize what he believes possible, and feels to be exacted by duty; but his intellectual apprehension of what is possible infinitely outruns his power, not of execution only, but even of power to attempt. He lies under the weight of incubus and nightmare; he lies in sight of all that he would fain perform, just as a man forcibly confined to his bed by the mortal languor of a relaxing disease, who is compelled to witness injury or outrage offered to some object of his tenderest love: he curses the spells which chain him down from motion; he would lay down his life if he might but get up and walk; but he is powerless as an infant, and cannot even attempt to rise.

I now pass to what is the main subject of these latter confessions, to the history and journal of what took place in my dreams, for these were the immediate and proximate cause of my acutest suffering.

The first notice I had of any important change going on in this part of my physical economy was from the reawakening of a state of eye generally incident to childhood, or exalted states of irritability. I know not whether my reader is aware that many children, perhaps most, have a power of painting, as it were upon the darkness, all sorts of phantoms. In some that power is simply a mechanical affection of the eye; others have a voluntary or semi-voluntary power to
dismiss or to summon them; or, as a child once said to me when I questioned him on this matter, “I can tell them to go, and they go ---, but sometimes they come when I don’t tell them to come.” Whereupon I told him that he had almost as unlimited a command over apparitions as a Roman centurion over his soldiers. — In the middle of 1817, I think it was, that this faculty became positively distressing to me: at night, when I lay awake in bed, vast processions passed along in mournful pomp; friezes of never-ending stories, that to my feelings were as sad and solemn as if they were stories drawn from times before Œdipus or Priam, before Tyre, before Memphis. And at the same time a corresponding change took place in my dreams; a theatre seemed suddenly opened and lighted up within my brain, which presented nightly spectacles of more than earthly splendour. And the four following facts may be mentioned as noticeable at this time:

1. That as the creative state of the eye increased, a sympathy seemed to arise between the waking and the dreaming states of the brain in one point—that whatsoever I happened to call up and to trace by a voluntary act upon the darkness was very apt to transfer itself to my dreams, so that I feared to exercise this faculty; for, as Midas turned all things to gold that yet baffled his hopes and defrauded his human desires, so whatsoever things capable of being visually represented I did but think of in the darkness, immediately shaped themselves into phantoms of the eye; and by a process apparently no less inevitable, when thus once traced in faint and visionary colours, like writings in sympathetic ink, they were drawn out by the fierce chemistry of my dreams into insufferable splendour that fretted my heart.

2. For this and all other changes in my dreams were accompanied by deep-seated anxiety and gloomy melancholy, such as are wholly incommunicable by words. I seemed every night to descend, not metaphorically, but literally to descend, into chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths, from which it seemed hopeless that I could ever reascend. Nor did I, by waking, feel that I had reascended. This I do not dwell upon; because the state of gloom which attended these gorgeous spectacles, amounting at last to utter darkness, as of some suicidal despondency, cannot be approached by words.

3. The sense of space, and in the end the sense of time, were both powerfully affected. Buildings, landscapes, &c., were exhibited in proportions so vast as the bodily eye is not fitted to receive. Space swelled, and was amplified to an extent of unutterable infinity. This, however, did not disturb me so much as the vast expansion of time; I sometimes seemed to have lived for 70 or 100 years in one night—nay, sometimes had feelings representative of a millennium passed in that time, or, however, of a duration far beyond the limits of any human experience.

4. The minutest incidents of childhood, or forgotten scenes of later years, were often revived: I could not be said to recollect them, for if I had been told of them when waking, I should not have been able to acknowledge them as parts of my past experience. But placed as they were before me, in dreams like intuitions, and clothed in all their evanescent circumstances and accompanying feelings, I recognised them instantaneously. I was once told by a near relative of mine, that having in her childhood fallen into a river, and being on the very verge of death but for the critical assistance which reached her, she saw in a moment her whole life, in its minutest incidents, arrayed before her simultaneously as in a mirror; and she had a faculty developed as suddenly for comprehending the whole and every part. This, from some opium experiences of mine, I can believe; I have indeed seen the same thing asserted twice in modern books, and accompanied by a remark which I am convinced is true; viz., that the dread book of account which the Scriptures speak of is in fact the mind itself of each individual. Of this at least I feel assured, that there is no such thing as forgetting possible to the mind; a thousand
accidents may and will interpose a veil between our present consciousness and the secret inscriptions on the mind; accidents of the same sort will also rend away this veil; but alike, whether veiled or unveiled, the inscription remains for ever, just as the stars seem to withdraw before the common light of day, whereas in fact we all know that it is the light which is drawn over them as a veil, and that they are waiting to be revealed when the obscuring daylight shall have withdrawn.

Having noticed these four facts as memorably distinguishing my dreams from those of health, I shall now cite a case illustrative of the first fact, and shall then cite any others that I remember, either in their chronological order, or any other that may give them more effect as pictures to the reader.

To my architecture succeeded dreams of lakes and silvery expanses of water: these haunted me so much that I feared (though possibly it will appear ludicrous to a medical man) that some dropsical state or tendency of the brain might thus be making itself (to use a metaphysical word) objective; and the sentient organ project itself as its own object. For two months I suffered greatly in my head, a part of my bodily structure which had hitherto been so clear from all touch or taint of weakness (physically I mean) that I used to say of it, as the last Lord Orford said of his stomach, that it seemed likely to survive the rest of my person. Till now I had never felt a headache even, or any the slightest pain, except rheumatic pains caused by my own folly. However, I got over this attack, though it must have been verging on something very dangerous.

The waters now changed their character—from translucent lakes shining like mirrors they now became seas and oceans. And now came a tremendous change, which, unfolding itself slowly like a scroll through many months, promised an abiding torment; and in fact it never left me until the winding up of my case. Hitherto the human face had mixed often in my dreams, but not despotically nor with any special power of tormenting. But now that which I have called the tyranny of the human face began to unfold itself. Perhaps some part of my London life might be answerable for this. Be that as it may, now it was that upon the rocking waters of the ocean the human face began to appear; the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces upturned to the heavens—faces imploring, wrathful, despairing, surged upwards by thousands, by myriads, by generations, by centuries: my agitation was infinite; my mind tossed and surged with the ocean.

**MAY 1818**

The Malay has been a fearful enemy for months. I have been every night, through his means, transported into Asiatic scenes. I know not whether others share in my feelings on this point; but I have often thought that if I were compelled to forego England, and to live in China, and among Chinese manners and modes of life and scenery, I should go mad. The causes of my horror lie deep, and some of them must be common to others. Southern Asia in general is the seat of awful images and associations. As the cradle of the human race, it would alone have a dim and reverential feeling connected with it. But there are other reasons. No man can pretend that the wild, barbarous, and capricious superstitions of Africa, or of savage tribes elsewhere, affect him in the way that he is affected by the ancient, monumental, cruel, and elaborate religions of Indostan, &c. The mere antiquity of Asiatic things, of their institutions, histories, modes of faith, &c., is so impressive, that to me the vast age of the race and name overpowers the sense of youth in the individual. A young Chinese seems to me an antediluvian man renewed. Even Englishmen, though not bred in any knowledge of such institutions, cannot but shudder at the mystic sublimity of castes that have flowed apart, and refused to mix,
through such immemorial tracts of time; nor can any man fail to be awed by the names of the Ganges or the Euphrates. It contributes much to these feelings that southern Asia is, and has been for thousands of years, the part of the earth most swarming with human life, the great officina gentium. Man is a weed in those regions. The vast empires also in which the enormous population of Asia has always been cast, give a further sublimity to the feelings associated with all Oriental names or images. In China, over and above what it has in common with the rest of southern Asia, I am terrified by the modes of life, by the manners, and the barrier of utter abhorrence and want of sympathy placed between us by feelings deeper than I can analyse. I could sooner live with lunatics or brute animals. All this, and much more than I can say or have time to say, the reader must enter into before he can comprehend the unimaginable horror which these dreams of Oriental imagery and mythological tortures impressed upon me. Under the connecting feeling of tropical heat and vertical sunlights I brought together all creatures, birds, beasts, reptiles, all trees and plants, usages and appearances, that are found in all tropical regions, and assembled them together in China or Indostan. From kindred feelings, I soon brought Egypt and all her gods under the same law. I was stared at, hooted at, grinned at, chattered at, by monkeys, by parroquets, by cockatoos. I ran into pagodas, and was fixed for centuries at the summit or in secret rooms: I was the idol; I was the priest; I was worshipped; I was sacrificed. I fled from the wrath of Brama through all the forests of Asia: Vishnu hated me: Seeva laid wait for me. I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris: I had done a deed, they said, which the ibis and the crocodile trembled at. I was buried for a thousand years in stone coffins, with mummies and sphynxes, in narrow chambers at the heart of eternal pyramids. I was kissed, with cancerous kisses, by crocodiles; and laid, confounded with all unutterable slimy things, amongst reeds and Nilotic mud.

I thus give the reader some slight abstraction of my Oriental dreams, which always filled me with such amazement at the monstrous scenery that horror seemed absorbed for a while in sheer astonishment. Sooner or later came a reflux of feeling that swallowed up the astonishment, and left me not so much in terror as in hatred and abomination of what I saw. Over every form, and threat, and punishment, and dim sightless incarceration, brooded a sense of eternity and infinity that drove me into an oppression as of madness. Into these dreams only it was, with one or two slight exceptions, that any circumstances of physical horror entered. All before had been moral and spiritual terrors. But here the main agents were ugly birds, or snakes, or crocodiles; especially the last. The cursed crocodile became to me the object of more horror than almost all the rest. I was compelled to live with him, and (as was always the case almost in my dreams) for centuries. I escaped sometimes, and found myself in Chinese houses, with cane tables, &c. All the feet of the tables, sofas, &c., soon became instinct with life: the abominable head of the crocodile, and his leering eyes, looked out at me, multiplied into a thousand repetitions; and I stood loathing and fascinated. And so often did this hideous reptile haunt my dreams that many times the very same dream was broken up in the very same way: I heard gentle voices speaking to me (I hear everything when I am sleeping), and instantly I awoke. It was broad noon, and my children were standing, hand in hand, at my bedside—come to show me their coloured shoes, or new frocks, or to let me see them dressed for going out. I protest that so awful was the transition from the damned crocodile, and the other unutterable monsters and abortions of my dreams, to the sight of innocent human natures and of infancy, that in the mighty and sudden revulsion of mind I wept, and could not forbear it, as I kissed their faces.

[CONCLUSION]

But I am now called upon to wind up a narrative which has already extended to an unreasonable length. Within more spacious limits the materials which I have used might have
been better unfolded, and much which I have not used might have been added with effect. Perhaps, however, enough has been given. It now remains that I should say something of the way in which this conflict of horrors was finally brought to a crisis. The reader is already aware (from a passage near the beginning of the introduction to the first part) that the Opium-eater has, in some way or other, "unwound almost to its final links the accursed chain which bound him." By what means? To have narrated this according to the original intention would have far exceeded the space which can now be allowed. It is fortunate, as such a cogent reason exists for abridging it, that I should, on a maturer view of the case, have been exceedingly unwilling to injure, by any such unaffecting details, the impression of the history itself, as an appeal to the prudence and the conscience of the yet unconfirmed opium-eater—or even (though a very inferior consideration) to injure its effect as a composition. The interest of the judicious reader will not attach itself chiefly to the subject of the fascinating spells, but to the fascinating power. Not the Opium-eater, but the opium, is the true hero of the tale, and the legitimate centre on which the interest revolves. The object was to display the marvellous agency of opium, whether for pleasure or for pain: if that is done, the action of the piece has closed.

However, as some people, in spite of all laws to the contrary, will persist in asking what became of the Opium-eater, and in what state he now is, I answer for him thus: The reader is aware that opium had long ceased to found its empire on spells of pleasure; it was solely by the tortures connected with the attempt to abjure it that it kept its hold. Yet, as other tortures, no less it may be thought, attended the non-abjuration of such a tyrant, a choice only of evils was left; and that might as well have been adopted which, however terrific in itself, held out a prospect of final restoration to happiness. This appears true; but good logic gave the author no strength to act upon it. However, a crisis arrived for the author’s life, and a crisis for other objects still dearer to him—and which will always be far dearer to him than his life, even now that it is again a happy one. I saw that I must die if I continued the opium. I determined, therefore, if that should be required, to die in throwing it off. How much I was at that time taking I cannot say, for the opium which I used had been purchased for me by a friend, who afterwards refused to let me pay him; so that I could not ascertain even what quantity I had used within the year. I apprehend, however, that I took it very irregularly, and that I varied from about fifty or sixty grains to 150 a day. My first task was to reduce it to forty, to thirty, and as fast as I could to twelve grains.

I triumphed. But think not, reader, that therefore my sufferings were ended, nor think of me as of one sitting in a dejected state. Think of me as one, even when four months had passed, still agitated, writhing, throbbing, palpitating, shattered, and much perhaps in the situation of him who has been racked, as I collect the torments of that state from the affecting account of them left by a most innocent sufferer of the times of James I. Meantime, I derived no benefit from any medicine, except one prescribed to me by an Edinburgh surgeon of great eminence, viz., ammoniated tincture of valerian. Medical account, therefore, of my emancipation I have not much to give, and even that little, as managed by a man so ignorant of medicine as myself, would probably tend only to mislead. At all events, it would be misplaced in this situation. The moral of the narrative is addressed to the opium-eater, and therefore of necessity limited in its application. If he is taught to fear and tremble, enough has been effected. But he may say that the issue of my case is at least a proof that opium, after a seventeen years’ use and an eight years’ abuse of its powers, may still be renounced, and that he may chance to bring to the task greater energy than I did, or that with a stronger constitution than mine he may obtain the same results with less. This may be true. I would not presume to measure the efforts of other men by my own. I heartily wish him more energy. I wish him the same success. Nevertheless, I had motives external to myself which he may unfortunately want, and these supplied me with
conscientious supports which mere personal interests might fail to supply to a mind debilitated by opium.

Jeremy Taylor conjectures that it may be as painful to be born as to die. I think it probable; and during the whole period of diminishing the opium I had the torments of a man passing out of one mode of existence into another. The issue was not death, but a sort of physical regeneration; and I may add that ever since, at intervals, I have had a restoration of more than youthful spirits, though under the pressure of difficulties which in a less happy state of mind I should have called misfortunes.

One memorial of my former condition still remains—my dreams are not yet perfectly calm; the dread swell and agitation of the storm have not wholly subsided; the legions that encamped in them are drawing off, but not all departed; my sleep is still tumultuous; and, like the gates of Paradise to our first parents when looking back from afar, it is still (in the tremendous line of Milton)

With dreadful faces throng’d, and fiery arms.