

THE CASE  
OF  
*JOHANNA SOUTHCOTT,*

AS FAR AS IT CAME UNDER HIS  
PROFESSIONAL OBSERVATION,  
*IMPARTIALLY STATED,*

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BY  
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**I**N submitting the case of JOHANNA SOUTH-COTT to the Public, it is my intention to remark as little as possible upon her pretensions or impositions, upon the mental delusions either of herself or her followers. But as her bodily affections were thought to have been greatly misunderstood or misrepresented by many of her medical attendants, my principal object is to shew that *all*, who were consulted upon this occasion of so much notoriety, were neither deceived in the beginning, nor disappointed at the termination of her malady; were neither themselves imposed upon, nor endeavoured to impose upon others. I shall therefore state as briefly and as intelligibly as I can, my means of judging, and my first formed, and afterwards confirmed opinion, of this case of supposed pregnancy, upon a view of the subject both alive and dead.

If I appear upon this occasion to speak too frequently in the first person, I trust it will be excused, inasmuch as it is scarcely to be avoided.

In the month of April, 1814, during an attendance upon Mrs. JANE TOWNLEY, a

Lady of fortune and respectability, and with whom JOHANNA SOUTHCOTT had resided for many years, I was first consulted upon this supposed case of pregnancy. In answer to my enquiries respecting her age, I was informed she was in the sixty-fourth year, and likewise that she was a virgin. The supposition of her being pregnant, appeared at the time so ludicrous and preposterous, that I could not at first consider it in a serious light; but upon the subject being continued, and the fact insisted upon, I was emphatically asked, would I believe it *when I saw the infant at the breast*, and to silence all objections at once, I was solemnly assured, that the effect was not of human but divine agency. I now thought it high time to give a firm and decisive answer to questions, evidently to my comprehension, so revolting to common sense, and to enter my protest against opinions so blasphemous and profane. I said, *seeing was believing*, and that I must be present, and have ocular demonstration of the fact, before I could believe in an event so improbable and so unlikely to take place. I cautioned them to be wary how they proceeded, and to consider the consequences of attempting a delusion so mischievous and wicked upon the ignorant and the credulous.

This advice was so unwelcome to the parties who consulted me, that in a few days after this

conversation, upon my refusing to listen any more to so disgusting a subject, I was desired to send in my account, and informed that my medical attendances would in future be dispensed with. I heard no more of this matter, except from public report, 'till the 19th day of August, when I was requested to call at No. 17, Weston Place, in my first round, and no name being mentioned, I supposed that I was wanted either by Mrs. TOWNLEY, or Mrs. UNDERWOOD, whom I had formerly attended at the same house. I was much surprised upon making my call, to be ushered into the presence of the Prophetess herself; who informed me that she had sent to consult me on her state of pregnancy. When I first entered, a male friend was in the room, but retired, and Mrs. UNDERWOOD was the only one present during this consultation. She proceeded to describe with great minuteness, every symptom, such as violent sicknesses, loathing of food, pains in the sides, particularly the right; bilious vomitings, pain in the loins and kidneys, frequent inclination to void urine, this in small quantities, and with difficulty, sometimes pale, and at other times high coloured, thick and muddy; shortness of breathing, and difficulty of moving, if it were only across the room; increase in size, and unusual listlessness; the breasts she described as enlarged, and having frequent excretions of a milky

fluid: she readily answered every question that I put to her with an apparent degree of candour, and submitted to every examination I thought proper, except per vaginam.

After a minute investigation of her situation and sensations, I told her, it was my firm opinion that she was not pregnant, and that I could account satisfactorily (at least to myself) for all her symptoms. Upon being desired to explain what I considered the nature of her complaints to be, I told her, I thought that the pains she suffered arose from biliary obstructions, and was confirmed in this opinion from her loss of appetite, bilious vomitings, pain in the right side, shootings up to the shoulder blade, and pain upon pressure. That the pain in her loins was from irritation in the kidneys; these sympathising with the biliary obstructions. That the increase in her size was owing to accumulation of fat from want of exercise, and that her loathings and loss of appetite were occasioned by debility of stomach, all originating in the same cause. I could find no appearance of milk in the breasts; they were swoln, and the vessels full and tumified, but more like glandular enlargement. I here learnt that her bowels were irregular: her evacuations occasionally clay coloured, sometimes black and offensive: her skin and the white of her eyes appeared slightly tinged with yellow.

She then mentioned, that she, as well as her female friends, had frequently felt something like a child move, and when this was the case, she frequently felt faint, and she was well convinced that there was something *wick*\* within her, or "might it not be water?" I told her I was certain there was no water, otherwise I should feel a fluctuation, and I was perfectly convinced there was no child. She then enquired of me, if ever I had been called upon to administer medicine or advice to any one having *a wolf in their inside*, as she had heard of such things: I told her I had heard of such strange tales, but had never met with such strange cases. She then declared her firm persuasion to be, that were she not with child, something ailed that would prove the death of her. My reply was, that I perfectly agreed with her in opinion, that if she was not relieved from her present distressing symptoms, they would eventually destroy her, and not improbably before the conclusion of the year. A little more having been said upon her imagined or real complaints, she consented to take what I should prescribe, or to use her own words, *subscribe*, if I would faithfully promise her, that it should not be any thing strong, or of force to destroy that, which she was convinced, was alive within her; and she could

\* A provincial word for *quick*.

assure me, that I was the only one of the many whom she had consulted, who had any doubt of her being pregnant; and then mentioned several practitioners, whose names are of the first repute, particularly that able Physician and Accouchier, Dr. SIMS. (He, in a few days after this conversation of mine with JOHANNA, contradicted in the public papers this statement of his opinion.) I here said, that however unwilling I was to differ in opinion from men of the first consideration in their profession, yet my own conviction was, that she was not pregnant, that I should prescribe accordingly, and that the remedies which I should administer for the cure of her disorders, which I could not help considering but of a fatal tendency, should not be of a simple nature, *of a milk and water sort.*

Being now fully persuaded that she meant to place herself under my management, I maturely considered her case, and had made up my mind how to treat it.

I thought the first things to be attended to were the extreme irritation of the stomach, the general debility she laboured under, the violent pains she suffered, and the biliary obstructions. In order to remove these ailments, I proposed giving tonic stomachic medicines, with opiates, and what I considered most essential to a cure,



small doses of hydrargyrus submuriatus, proportioning them according to the state of the stomach, and as the biliary secretions, &c. should be affected by them: her diet to be light and nutritious, carefully avoiding wine, spirits, and all fermenting liquors. I prescribed accordingly, and sent her some tonic draughts, with an opiate, purposing to administer the hydrargyrus submuriatus, if the stomach was less irritable, the next evening. Before I could repeat my visit, which I designed on the following morning, I received the annexed note from Miss TOWNLEY.

“ Mrs. SOUTHCOTT requests Mrs. TOWNLEY to inform Mr. MATHIAS, that the medicines he sent for her last night, *she was answered* she should not take, as he had drawn a wrong judgment of her disorder, and therefore desires he will send no more; but if the disorder, and the effects thereof, be not removed by November, then she begs me to inform you, that you are the only medical man in London that she would apply to for skill, as you was the only medical man that accounted for her complaints, and the cause they might proceed from.

“ *Saturday, August 20, 1814.*”

Having thus received my dismissal, of course I did not wait upon her any more.

About this period, Letters appeared in the Papers from Dr. REECE, in which he proposes, that, having satisfied himself by actual examination of JOHANNASOUTHCOTT's real pregnancy,

and knowing for certain that her followers had made application to the ARCHBISHOP of CANTERBURY to admit her into his Palace, and appoint proper persons to attend her, the LORD CHANCELLOR should himself be applied to, and be requested to take her under his special care, provide her with suitable apartments, and cause experienced Accouchiers to attend her. About this time a Letter of JOHANNA'S appeared in the Morning Herald, dated September 1st, the parts which concern me are as follow:—

- “After Dr. SIMS had passed his judgement, *I sent for a medical man, whom I knew was strong in unbelief*, that it could not be possible, and therefore I sent to him to know if he could prescribe any thing that would do me good, if I was not in a family way. He heard my statement from the beginning; he examined me, and said if I was a young married woman, he should say I was *not* in a family way. I asked him what disorder he would judge I had, to cause all the pains, sickness, and the increase of my body: he said he looked upon it I had been long in a debilitated state, and the severe pain I had felt in my back was from a *hurt* in the kidnies, which was the cause of all my other complaints: that my sickness proceeded from a lodgment of bile in my stomach, which prevented me from having an appetite, but

remove the cause and the effects will cease. He said he should not proceed with violent medicines, nor should he give me *milk* and *water*. I told him that I would not take any thing that would be hurtful to a woman in a family way. He sent me two draughts, but Mr. PHILLIPS advised me not to take them, and *I was ordered not*, and sent to him to send me no more."

It is pretty clear that I am intended to be described by the *person strong in unbelief*; and she, by this expression, alludes to my opinion given in April, to Miss TOWNLEY. In the preceding part of this letter, as published by Dr. REECE, JOHANNA says, that of the nine medical gentlemen consulted by her, six of them had pronounced her pregnant, and three were doubtful. Now if the person *strong in unbelief* was one of the latter tribe, his *unbelief* could not be very *strong*, which suffered him to remain in a *doubting* state.

I had never any doubt upon the subject: and after examination, when I gave a decisive negative to her pretensions and conceptions, she observed to me, "I fear you determine thus on account of my great age." I replied, "were you much younger, my opinion, after what has this day come to my knowledge, must be the same."

This letter of JOHANNA'S, as far it concerns

me, is upon the whole pretty accurate and descriptive of her complaints and their origin, as they appeared to me. Only she substitutes *hurt* for *irritation* in the kidneys, the *effect* for the *cause*: for I all along attributed her complaints to biliary obstructions; or, as she was pleased to term it, *bile on the stomach*.

If it be here asked, why did you not before the termination of her disease give us your opinion of its cause, which you would now have us to believe for the first time to be the true one, long ago known and discovered for a certainty by yourself; why give it us now, when it may appear so much like an afterthought? My answer is—that my opinion was no secret; that I had no sooner formed it, than I again and again declared it to my medical acquaintance, and they can bear witness, if it be necessary to call upon them, that it was no other *then* than it is *now*. I was indeed much urged by them to make it public: but this I resisted, because I was not desirous of appearing before the public; because I was not at all used to write for the public; and because, if my opinion should be controverted, I had neither mind nor leisure for controversy.

Hearing of JOHANNA'S death, I had a desire, and in my mind a right to be present, should

it be determined to examine the body by dissecting it. I accordingly addressed the following Letter to Miss TOWNLEY :—

*“Toubridge Place, Dec. 29th., 1814.*

“MADAM,

“Having heard through the medium of the public papers of the death of your late friend Mrs. SOUTHCOTT, and from the circumstance, well known to yourself, of my having expressed an opinion that she laboured under complaints not connected with a state of pregnancy, I have to request that I may be present when the body of the deceased is opened; assuring you, that in making this request I am actuated by motives far different from those of idle curiosity.

“I remain, your obedient Servant,

“P. MATHIAS.”

In answer, I received the following Note from her friend and amanuensis, Mrs. UNDERWOOD :—

*“Dec. 29th., 1814.*

“SIR,

“I received your letter, addressed to Mrs. TOWNLEY, requesting permission to be present at the opening of the body of Mrs. SOUTHCOTT, to ascertain her disease, as your opinion differed from some others of the faculty respecting the pregnancy. We are perfectly satisfied of the propriety of your request, and the friends wish to accede to it, that you may satisfy yourself respecting the disease. If you will be pleased to come immediately, or as soon as you conveniently can, to see Mrs. SOUTHCOTT in her present state, to ascertain that she is now actually dead, being the condition on

which the medical men are permitted to be present, and with which they have already complied.

"I remain, Sir,

"Your humble Servant,

"ANN UNDERWOOD."

"38, Manchester Street, Manchester Square."

"Please to ask for Mr. TOLHURST."

And the day after, the following one, without name :—

"Mr. MATHIAS is requested to be at No. 38, Manchester Street, at two o'clock tomorrow. Secrecy is required till after Friday.

"Dec. 30th."

Saturday, the 31st, was the day fixed upon for opening the body, and I was then present.

*Appearances upon Dissection.*

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THE whole body was livid and putrid, appearing as if death had taken place a very considerable time;—but easily to be accounted for, from the circumstance of the room being kept in a certain temperature, and hot applications being constantly kept to the extremities and body, agreeably to a desire expressed by the deceased, that this should be done for four days after her death. The integuments being divided in the usual manner, we were all much surprised by the appearance of fat that presented itself, being in some parts of the abdomen near four inches in thickness. The intestines appeared tolerably healthy, and much inflated—they were secured, that the air contained in them might not escape; the odour from the body being most offensive, and at times scarcely bearable. The *Omentum* was next examined: on its upper surface it was livid, but this evidently proceeded from the heat applied, and not from disease:—it was the largest I ever saw, being nearly four times the usual size, and appeared one lump of fat: this preternatural enlargement, and the thickness of fat upon the abdomen, with the flatus of

the intestines, which existed, although in a less degree, during life, satisfactorily accounts for the extraordinary size of the deceased.

The *Uterus* was next examined and dissected out. Neither the promised Shiloh nor any other fœtus was found within it; and it was apparently free from disease; the ovaria were in a healthy state.

The *Liver* was next examined; it appeared as one putrid mass, but of its natural size: the gall bladder was found considerably enlarged, as well as its duct, and nearly a dozen gall stones of various sizes and shapes (some of them as large as marbles) were found contained therein. The rest of the viscera were not examined minutely, from the extreme offensiveness of the body.

Here the friends of the deceased were anxious that it should be ascertained, if possible, whether she had ever borne children: it was utterly impossible to speak to this circumstance, first, because the parts were so very putrid, and because the operator, in removing the uterus, cut through a considerable portion of the vagina. The pains felt in the breasts, and the fullness apparent in them, which she ascribed to the secretion of milk, were evidently occasioned by glandular enlargement;



for, upon cutting down upon the right breast, there was seen to exist a considerable circumscribed tumor. The motion so perceptible in the abdomen, which was considered by herself and her believers as the incontrovertible proof of a living child, and always persisted in by them as demonstrative of the fact, must have arisen from flatus escaping from one intestine to another; and was in my interview with the patient in August, stated as the probable cause of the sensation, which she then described as *life within her*.

The examination upon the whole proved, that the principal viscera affected were the liver and its ducts; the existence of gall stones accounted for the pains in the region of the liver, the affection of the stomach, and the consequent sickness, which rejected, for the last eight or ten weeks, all nourishment administered either in a solid or liquid state.

The affection in the kidneys, various pains in the loins and shoulder blade, are ascribable to this organic derangement of the liver and gall bladder. There appeared no other symptoms of a fatal tendency, if we except the exhaustion, which the pains arising from this obstruction in the viscera, and causing the rejection of all nutriment from the stomach, must necessarily create.

Medicine of every sort she invariably refused, saying that she did not wish to outlive her malady, if it were not occasioned by pregnancy.

There were present at the dissection of the body the undernamed medical gentlemen, Drs. SIMS, ADAMS, REECE, MESSRS. CLARKE, TAUNTON, WANT, WAGSTAFF, WETHERALL, PHILLIPS, and some others, whose names I did not know. Add to these many of her friends and believers.

Should the minds of the public be at this period at all curious to learn any thing about JOHANNA SOUTHCOTT and her ailments, I here with all due respect and diffidence present them with my opinion of her case, formed early in the beginning of her disorder, strengthened in its progress, and fully confirmed by its conclusion. That some of the medical gentlemen consulted by her should have mistaken her symptoms, and accounted differently for her complaints, is not in the least surprising. In practice this occurs every day, with little imputation upon the skill of the practitioner. But that any one medical man should be so far mistaken as to perceive in her signs of pregnancy, to believe himself, and endeavour to persuade others to believe that they did really exist, is as surprising, as that any one of sound intellect should be found to place implicit

confidence in her pretensions, her predictions, and her promises. That some medical men have been so mistaken, so imposed upon, and so instrumental in imposing upon others, we have their own declarations in proof; that not only one, but multitudes of persons, who in other respects cannot be deemed of unsound minds, have believed from the bottom of their souls in JOHANNA'S fallacies and delusions—is a fact—which must be allowed, and will be hereafter with shame recorded. And all this is a thousand times more *wonderful*, than all JOHANNA'S *wonders of wonders!*

I have often been asked, did I consider JOHANNA SOUTHCOTT as insane? Certainly not. Dr. SIMS has given it as his opinion, that she laboured under strong mental delusions—but if he means here *involuntary delusion*, I am obliged to differ even from so respectable authority. If she were mad, there was more of consistency, regularity, and of cunning working amid the overthrow of her understanding, than ever before came under my observation. And I have known and observed many maniacs of all descriptions, and in every state of mental delusion—from the imagined king to the ideal beggar. Crowns of paper, and sceptres of straw, are the gewgaws of the one: useless pins and worthless shreds, hoarded with care,

are meant to preserve the other from dreaded want.

Notoriety, ease, and affluence, appear to have been the prevailing passions of JOHANNA'S mind. And the means which she adopted to fulfil her desires, would seem, and have actually been proved, well calculated for the end. Early in life, when she should have laboured diligently with her needle, in an Upholsterer's employ, at Exeter, she found it much easier to talk nonsense by the hour, than to work hard by the day. As her notoriety and followers increase, she most dexterously multiplies the means of obtaining the objects of her wishes. She sets out, as it were, upon a voyage of discovery, and happily finds a terra incognita, ideal truly, but to her productive of substantial revenues. If the many shares in her millenium have really been disposed of and paid for, which are said to have been, this kingdom of hers must have proved to her a mine of wealth. Certainly the voluntary tribute to the Queen of this unknown country has abundantly maintained her in ease, state, and dignity. No! believe me, JOHANNA was more *infatuating* than *infatuated*.

Her predictions were loud and frequent—full of comfort and happiness to her own subjects—dreadful denunciations of woe to the rebellious

creatures that did not acknowledge her sovereignty, and trust to her prescience. But of their fulfilment I never heard. And her life was very differently ordered from those, who aforetime had the name, character, and office of Prophets. They fasted often—watched incessantly—and prayed continually—they lived coarsely, and were more coarsely clad: they upon all occasions, but when otherwise commanded by Him, whose servants they were, avoided publicity, and studiously shunned the busy haunts of men: but JOHANNA on the contrary upon all occasions sought publicity; to this end, when one method failed, another was resorted to. I never could learn that she either watched, fasted, or prayed. On the contrary, she passed much of her time in bed—in downy indolence—ate much and often—and prayed—never. She loved to lodge delicately, and feast luxuriously. Latterly, when she would have it that she was with child, she must have, like other Ladies in the like condition, her longings too. Accordingly she took a longing to asparagus, when it was by no means a cheap article of food: and so strong was her longing, that she is said to have eat at one meal one hundred and sixty heads before she could allay it.

If I have departed somewhat from my original intention by making these remarks, such

as they are, upon JOHANNA's impositions, I have been almost imperceptibly led astray; and I trust this aberration will be forgiven me.

I remain,

The Public's most obliged,

And humble Servant,

**P. MATHIAS.**