

## NERVOUS IRRITABILITY: ITS CAUSES AND CURE.

BY A FAMILY DOCTOR.



THE subject chosen for this month's paper is one of far greater importance than might at first sight appear; for from this complaint—if complaint it may be called which is but a symptom after all—mental or physical, thousands upon thousands are almost constantly suffering. Many a cup of bliss is embittered by it, many a life which otherwise might be happy enough is rendered wretched on account of it. Young and old too suffer from it, and neither sex is exempt.

It may or it may not be consoling for some to know, that the irritability from which they suffer is functional more than organic—that it indicates no actual lesion of tissue; in other words, no real disease. But is it to be disregarded on this account? No, certainly not; for no functional disease of any part can remain long without organic mischief ensuing. Irritability might therefore be looked upon as the warning voice of nature, calling one's attention to present weakness, local or constitutional, and future mischief. It is the shadow of a coming event, very often, alas! the shadow of death itself. It should therefore not be neglected.

I will now state, as briefly as I can, a few of the more common of the innumerable symptoms from which people afflicted with irritability of the nervous system often suffer. Many of them, I may premise, are just those on which vampire quacks fatten; and I am sorry to say that not a few of the members of my own profession unwittingly and unintentionally play into the hands of these fellows. In this way, among others, a patient who, from some innate modesty of feeling, has long kept quiet about his sufferings, making almost superhuman efforts to conquer them by the force of will, is impelled at last to take counsel of a physician. He describes to him as well as he can—for people of this kind are seldom good orators—his trouble and symptoms. Probably he is met with but an impatient hearing—for it must be admitted that cases of the kind are troublesome to a busy work-a-day doctor—an impatient hearing and a bit of advice.

"I'll give you some medicine," the physician says, "but you must really try to get over it. It is nervousness; one half and more of your symptoms are mere freaks of imagination. Live as well as you can, take plenty of exercise, and—and take the medicine."

Try to get over it, indeed! Goodness help the poor fellow; isn't that what he has been endeavouring to do for months and months? And do you think he carries away with him from this well-meaning doctor's room much hope in his heart, or much faith in the pills and medicine he has received? It would be a

wonder if he did. But, on the other hand, it is no wonder at all that, when in the columns of some second-class weekly he sees many of his symptoms described, and a remedy of tried value advertised to remove them, he should snap at the bait, and, having failed with the physician, trust to the quack.

But should graver symptoms, or seemingly grave symptoms, present themselves to the notice of the medical man he consults—such as severe headache, loss of sleep, cramps and twitchings in the limbs, loss of memory, emotional or hysterical feelings, &c.—the case may be relegated to the black list: put down as softening of the brain; and probably the patient told, with a candour that is questionable—for candour often kills—that little can be done to avert a fatal termination.

But the head may ache, there may be oftentimes giddiness, and singing in the ears, and even partial deafness and dimness of sight, with all sorts of strange sensations in the limbs, and sleeplessness as well, without any actual brain lesion at all.

There may be present, off and on, in people afflicted with nervous debility, tic or neuralgia. But more often there is nothing of the sort, but a general feeling of debility of the nervous system throughout the whole body. The patient is far below *par*; he knows it, but often tries to cheat himself into the belief that his condition calls for no anxiety. But he is not fit for honest labour, whether mental or bodily; his memory is not quite what it was, and it irritates him to follow out any subject which requires clear reasoning capabilities. Pains of a darting, flying nature he suffers from, and these may alarm him or startle him most unnecessarily; he lays too much stress on them, feels sure they will increase, and that he is about to have an attack of neuralgia, gout, or something worse—he can't tell what.

A pain in the region of the heart, though it be but a mere momentary stitch, causes the patient to believe that there is cardiac mischief brewing, and that that will be the end of him after all. For to many sufferers from irritability death is a spectre which is almost constantly looming ahead, or popping up every now and then when least expected.

But nervous irritability does affect the heart functionally, and the symptoms are usually more distressing than in real disease. There may be almost constant dull, aching pains in the left side, inability to lie with comfort on that side, irregularity of the pulse, which often misses, or seems to miss a beat, or goes on for a time flutteringly; giving rise to the idea in the sufferer's mind that death is imminent, or at least impending. A little *sal volatile*, by the way, and a change of the position of the body is often sufficient to dispel these feelings for the time. In weaker subjects, this fluttering of the heart is often a most distressing symptom; in those who are more plethoric,



palpitation is more common. Both states are often caused by flatulence on the stomach.

Independent of the many bodily symptoms from which the patient suffers, there are many which may be called mental. There is general mental weariness, if I may so term it; a dislike for society, that erst was pleasant enough to him; depression of spirits, inability to reason out any subject for any length of time, groundless timidity, needless anxiety, and partial loss of memory and confusion of thought. Added to this, there is a strange and indescribable feeling of restlessness, which makes the sufferer quite from home in any society. He is on the worst of terms with himself, but he feels unfit to keep company with any one save himself, and that is the worst companion he possibly could have.

Another symptom, and that too a very distressing one, is peevishness or irascibility of temper. He cannot help it, even with the best intentions and the kindest nature in the world; and the very fact that he cannot worries him beyond measure.

He may also have thoughts that run away with him, as it were, and sentences and words that come into his mind, repeating themselves over and over again, till he feels almost crazy. It would be strange if symptoms like these did not produce restless and maybe sleepless nights, or, at all events, nights of unrefreshing slumber, and consequent weary, listless days. With all his sufferings he may look the reverse of unhealthy; external sympathy is a thing, therefore, that he knows he need not look for, and he is apt to look upon his dearest friends as cruel in consequence.

Now, although many people are naturally of the nervous temperament—among whom may be numbered the majority of our writers—poets, philosophers, and people of high mental endowments, and are so all their lives, extreme symptoms, like those I have just mentioned, must be looked upon as abnormal, and therefore belonging to the category of diseases. They may usually be traced to some distinct cause or causes.

Anxiety of mind, worry, care, and overwork, bodily or mental, but especially the latter, are all sure in the long run to debilitate nerve-tissue. Melancholy thoughts of any kind have the same tendency; so have extremes of heat and cold. A hot summer or a cold winter will often produce nervous irritability, in those who never knew they possessed nerves before. The want of exercise or plenty of fresh air, *bad water*, residence on an unhealthy soil, or in a damp, humid atmosphere, and sleeping in badly ventilated apartments, will bring about the same dire results. Need I add, as exciting causes of this complaint, over indulgence in wine, tea, and tobacco, and excess of every kind, mental or bodily?

If you have care and anxiety, you are bound to get rid of it, to a great extent anyhow, before you can hope for a cure. If you can trace the cause of your nervous irritability, you must remove it; that, in itself, will be half the battle. Next, you must do your best to obtain healthful, refreshing sleep—without the aid of night draughts, remember. A moderate degree

of exercise; a light, nutritious, early supper; a bath, with friction, last thing; a moderately soft bed, with light, warm covering, and a well-ventilated, darkened apartment, will all favour this. By day *everything* that vexes, worries, or annoys in the slightest must be avoided. The diet must be carefully studied and regulated. Exercise in the open air is to be enjoined, the hours of labour must be shortened, and cheerful society cultivated. Medicine needs mention last. This should be of a tonic nature chiefly, supplemented by some such mild aperient as the rhubarb pill. Those who have not read my article on tonic remedies, would do well to procure the back number of the Magazine and study it. Arsenic, zinc, iron, or quinine, with the bitter tonics, are usually needed in the treatment of irritability; but whatever tonic be chosen, it ought to be taken in small doses at first, and it ought not to irritate the stomach or bowels, else it will do mischief. The salt-water bath of a morning deserves a trial, so does the shower-bath for those who can stand it; and the last remedial measure I have to mention is entire change of residence and scene.

I now come to say a word or two about the rational treatment of irritability. And, perhaps, some suffering reader may, in the innocence of his heart, expect me to propose a cure for his sad condition; perhaps even prescribe a medicine that is sure to lift him out of the slough of despair, and set him at once upon the high road to health and enjoyment of life. Alas! debilitated nerves are not restored to their normal condition by any medicinal specific whatever. *But*, if I have got such a one to believe that the symptoms from which he suffers are the harbingers of real and serious illness, the beacons that nature sets up to warn him off the rocks of dissolution, I have already done something for him; and if I can make him believe that there is hope of a cure for his ailment, I have done a deal more. Nevertheless, he must remember that the attempt at restoration of health must be a very radical one.

I had a fruit-tree that grew in a certain position in my kitchen garden some time ago. It was not an old tree by any means, but, small as it was, it did not look young; the bark on it was ragged and rough, its stem was thin and weakly, and it leant sadly to one side. I had passed it by many a time, perhaps, with a mere glance, to see if it gave promise of blossom or fruit. I never saw any on it till a couple of years ago, when, somewhat to my surprise, it presented me with six beautiful pears. Six—only a small offering, but it set me a-thinking, and I determined to do something for it. I soon found that it grew on but a poorly-nourished soil; but, independent of this, it had a world of care to contend against: it was exposed to an eddy of east wind, and it was overshadowed by a mighty apple-tree, so that, bend as it would, it could not get a "blink" of the sunshine. What did I do for it? I carefully transplanted it to more favourable quarters; I tended it and nourished it, and now, instead of six pears, I had bushels from it last fall. But had I left it where it was, all care, pruning, and manuring would have been labour lost.