

ON SLEEP AND NERVOUS UNREST.

BY A FAMILY DOCTOR



HERE is, in this busy little island which the Briton calls his home, a very large proportion of human beings—many of them well enough off, pecuniarily speaking—to whom the world is all a worry, and life a long-continued fever. People of this class are not invalids in the strict meaning of the term, although they oftentimes suffer far more than the generality of invalids.

Pleasures they never know; hard work is a weariness; and yet they are unable to enjoy their leisure when they obtain it. Their symptoms, mental and bodily, taken collectively, constitute a disease which, for want of a better, I designate by the name of nervous unrest.

A person so suffering does not consider himself ill, nor is he looked upon as a subject for condolence by those with whom he comes into daily contact. How could he be? He does not look a bit like the ghost of Banquo at the feast; when you meet him in the street the smile rises readily enough to his lips, and merriment even may sparkle in his eye. If you search for anything lugubrious about him, you will search in vain. He is a ready talker, a ready listener, and in business a perfect ready reckoner. If you ask his opinion about any question of moment, you have not to wait long for your reply. He will be down at the bottom of the page, down at the Q. E. D., in less time than it would have taken most men to arrange their premise. His friends say of such a man, "Poor so-and-so! he never was very robust in health, but how wonderfully lively he is!" while his enemies—if he has any—put him down as bird-witted, and prophesy his sudden extinction some day like the snuff of a candle.

Very kind of both friends and foes, I must say, but as a rule both are in some degree mistaken. For, in all likelihood, hardly has he shaken hands with you, with a hurried *au revoir*, until he heaves a sigh; and if you could see your friend sometimes, when he is all alone, you would not think there was much merriment about him: genuine, mind you, though his manner may have been when you met him in the street. In his moments of loneliness, were he to ask himself the question, "Am I happy?" the answer would be "No; I never know what it means to be happy." Perhaps though—and this is a proof of the truth of Pope's lines:

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast;
Man never is, but always to be, blest"—

he promises himself happiness some day, even in this world, when he shall have done this, or accomplished

that, or succeeded to that other, forgetting that true happiness lies only in contentment with one's present condition and legitimate lot in life.

But while his friends may be right enough in saying that our patient—for so I must call him—was never very robust, provided that he possesses blood free from any hereditary taint, and a heart not over-dilated, there is good chance of his giving his foes the lie, and not going out like the snuff of a candle. People suffering from this fever of life, this nervous unrest, seldom look strong: they do not carry abundance of muscle, and therefore are unfit for any long-continued bodily strain; but, nevertheless, the strength of their muscle compared to its size seems often out of all proportion, and this enables them to do in one hour that which it would take a heavily-built man three to perform. Do not marvel at this, pray, nor doubt the truth of what I am telling you. Nervous force is a wonderful thing. I have seen a boy of seventeen in a fit of excitement and passion whom it required the united strength of four men to hold down. Nor do men who suffer from the complaint we are considering bend very easily before the storms of life, blow they ever so wildly; little things annoy them more, and sorrow itself, which seems at first ready to crush them, is, after a time, cast aside by the very resiliency of their nervous systems. And so, too, they may for a time succumb, and that readily enough, to the little ailments of life, to trifling colds, or rheums, or aches, but these seldom lead to anything very serious; they pass speedily away, and the same causes which may produce deadly inflammations in the heavy-bodied and plethoric will, ten to one, be productive in the nervous of only some trifling inconvenience.

The reader will observe that I am talking about the sufferer from nervous unrest, as what people call a somewhat spare man. And so he is; a person of the true nervous temperament is never obese. But, it may be observed, do we not frequently see fat people who are exceedingly nervous? No, I reply; the term is misapplied: such people suffer from timidity, not from true nervousness; and such timidity has its seat at the heart, which is generally flaccid or fatty, and always easily agitated. Your true nervous man is a brave man. He may march into a battle, up to the cannon's mouth even, with a feeling of dread, something telling him he will never return; but he goes there all the same, and once face to face with something to fight, be it fire or sword or stormy wave, fear is all, all forgotten in the excitement of conquering or being conquered. They are heroes *then*. Yes; undoubtedly the hour of reaction comes sooner or later, and they are low and miserable enough when it does; but, after all, to people of the nervous temperament must be granted the credit of being the salt of the earth, and I

really do not see how this world could well wag along without them.

But, inasmuch as people who suffer from nervous unrest are possessors of a sorrow none the less acute because it is borne silently and uncomplainingly—inasmuch as nervous unrest is a wearying, heart-breaking burden in itself, that if not eased and lightened increases with years, bears down the frame, and even enshrouds with a gloom that cannot be penetrated the latter end of many a long and useful life—therefore I do not think I am wrong in considering it a disease, and trying to prescribe means for its alleviation.

Well then, in the first place, the sufferer from nervous unrest often longs for the quiet of retirement. If free, he thinks, from the world's bustle and care, he would be all right. He longs for the wings of the morning, in order to fly away and be at rest. This is a mistake. To be always basking in the sunshine of excitement, always in the midst of the battle of life, or always engaged in the exciting gamble of business, is killing, but a certain amount of excitement is necessary to the very existence of a person of the nervous temperament. Without it he would droop and die, like a tender plant placed in a semi-darkened room, into which the sun never shines, nor the fresh air finds access.

The great object of the nervous should be, as far as the body is concerned, to establish and keep up a correct balance between the blood and the nervous system. Sufferers from nervous unrest think and live faster than do others, and there is a greater waste of tissue, causing a drain on the system, which must be met by a due supply of healthy nutriment. It is when the demand is greater than this supply that hours of depression ensue, hours of unhappiness and misery by day, and sleeplessness or broken rest at night. Regulation and due selection of diet are therefore imperative, if a certain degree of happiness and comfort in living is to be obtained. The state of the stomach and digestive organs must be carefully studied; whatever is known to disagree must be avoided. The food should be taken as regularly as possible, day after day at the same hour, and not in too large quantities. A hearty meal to the nervous produces a certain degree of excitement, which is assuredly followed by slight dyspepsia, the only symptoms of which may be peevishness and irritability. The food should not be sloppy, and too much liquid should be avoided. No work should be done for half an hour after eating. Breakfast should be early, dinner in the middle of the day, and supper three hours at least before going to bed. But a lunch or milk biscuit may be eaten a short time before retiring. Perfect sleep will not be obtained if the stomach be entirely empty; indeed, going to bed with an empty stomach is generally followed by getting up next morning with that organ partially disturbed by gas, nauseating juices, and bile itself. The food should be nourishing, but at the same time substantial. The stomach is composed of muscular tissue, and deteriorates if not exercised: a truth which few are aware of, but which facts prove.

By judicious management of the digestive organs you supply the nerves with the elements of nutrition.

But you must do more: the blood must be as pure as possible; it must be decarbonised by plenty of fresh air; while the heart, the great centre propeller, must be invigorated and kept up to the mark by a due proportion of exercise. This must on no account be carried to the verge of fatigue.

Food, fresh air, and exercise act then on the nervous system through the blood, but the nerves are directly braced and toned by means of the cold or tepid sponge-bath, with occasionally a warm vapour or hot-air bath.

Change of scene and change of climate are nearly always beneficial to the sufferers from nervous unrest. Most cases are benefited by seaside or mountain air, but to some, life in the Midland counties, where trees wave and fields are green, is more soothing and calmative. But relaxing climates on the one hand, and exciting on the other, are as a rule to be avoided. When I speak of climates, I must be understood to mean those of our own country; but a sea-voyage does much good.

Is there no relief to be had from medicines? Sometimes there is, but it is not well-sustained. Flying for help to the Pharmacopœia is not a habit to be recommended, and I would advise the nervous patient to take no medicine without first consulting a physician—cod-liver oil probably excepted; but this is more a food than a physic, and does much good as a calmative in cases where it is readily digested.

I have, last of all, to say a word or two about sleep—“*tired Nature's sweet restorer.*” The italics are mine, not the poet's. I wish thereby to draw the reader's attention to the fact that unless a due proportion of muscular exercise be taken during the day, the sleep by night will not be refreshing. Exercise is the first preparation for sleep, and after supper, which, I have already said, should be early, the mind must not be allowed to dwell upon any thoughts that excite or annoy. It is a good plan to read for some time before going to bed, and one pipe of good tobacco may be allowed. Do not read in bed, but read in your bedroom: perhaps lying on the sofa, in comfortable *dishabille*, and ready whenever the inclination to sleep steals over you to get gently and softly between the sheets. The room should be quiet and dark, with the window-curtains drawn to exclude the too obtrusive morning light. The temperature of the room should, if possible, be sustained at about 55° or 60°. Bank the fire, else it will go out, and the temperature will fall, to your detriment. The bed itself should be moderately hard, but very smooth and even, the bed-clothes light and warm, and the pillows soft and rather high. The room should be judiciously ventilated, and the curtains should not go right round the bed. I need scarcely add that narcotics or sleeping draughts are most injurious, whether in the shape of opiates or that slow but certain poison called chloral hydrate.

In conclusion, if he values his life and comfort, the sufferer from nervous unrest must do his best to avoid over-excitement of all kinds, both bodily and mental, and endeavour to maintain the *mens sana in corpore sano*, which, for once in a way, I must translate as a pure mind in a pure body.