

ENNUI: ITS SYMPTOMS, CAUSES, AND CURE.

BY A FAMILY DOCTOR.



It is only of late years that the symptoms I am about to describe have been dignified by a specific name; and even now, so far as I know, the term *ennui*, as a distinct ailment or disorder, has not found its way into books on medicine. Physicians fight shy of describing it; they seem rather ashamed of it than otherwise, and feel a very human inclination to quietly laugh at or pooh-pooh it. But, nevertheless, they treat patients for this ailment every day. They do not consider it, as a rule, a deadly disease; it occasions medical men no distress of mind; it is never a subject for carriage meditation. So far, so good; and much more could be said about doctors and the treatment or consideration of *ennui*, which I leave to be inferred. However, there the symptoms are, distinct enough, and no doctor would attempt to deny: first, that they are really distressing; and secondly, that they may, and often do, lead to something far worse. These two reasons form my apology for devoting a paper to this peculiar ailment.

It is usually said in the hackneyed language of the every-day journals that "*ennui* is one of the ailments of an advanced or modern civilisation." Is this so? I very much doubt it. If my reading serves me rightly, *ennui*—by some other name—was well known in ancient Greece and Rome long, long before the inhabitants of Britain had become artists in dress or adepts in the art of cookery. Do not tell me that those exquisites of *Roma Antiqua*, who listlessly dawdled their forenoons away at those wonderful baths of theirs, never suffered from *ennui*. Their poets and satirists describe symptoms very much identical with those of the modern ailment, at all events; and the same may be said for the inhabitants of the Greece of bygone days. So much for the antiquity of the disorder. As for the phrase "advanced civilisation," I will not have it. I shall not admit the right of any civilisation to be called advanced which cannot hold its own, whose manhood leans to the effeminate, or even effete. Rome fell, the glories of Greece have faded and gone, neither wealth nor luxury could sustain them, for, strange though it may seem, anomalous even, a nation and people may retrograde—may slide back towards barbarism while dressed in purple and fine linen.

But to leave these ancient nations, and come nearer home, I find that two centuries ago, or thereabouts, an ailment very much akin to our modern *ennui* existed, and was very radically treated indeed. This disorder, says my authority, gave rise in the mind to "feare and sadness, euill thoughts without any manifest cause, the braine being as it were clouded all ouer. They are oucht with a wearinesse of life, and with ill and deep thoughts of mind; oftentimes you shall finde them

crying; and now they delight in solitariness; within a short time they will as much condemn it. They are ever musing, their sleep is short, and oftentimes they are therein disquieted with troublesome dreams."

To accomplish the cure of this disorder the ancient physician set himself to work with a will. One cannot help pitying the poor patient—he must have had a lively time of it. I can fancy I see him gazing out at the window with a look of affright on his pale face, and exclaiming, "What! more drugs!" as the errand-boy, hot and red, staggers up the steps with his heavily laden basket.

More drugs? Yes; just listen, reader, to the list, and it does not contain half of them: "preparers" and "strengtheners," "aperients," "emetics," "draughts" and "potions and pills," "conserves," "juleps," "quills," "gargarismes," "embrochs," "a sirrupe to cause sleepe," "lozenges," "opiates," "oyntments," and "a bath."

The bath must have been the best of it, the worst of it probably being that all the while the lancet was kept busy—busy at its work. We live in better times, and our modern *ennui* is better understood, and more skilfully treated.

The symptoms of the complaint nowadays differ, so far as an advanced case is concerned, in no very material way from those of the ancient disorder; but there are all stages and degrees of the ailment, from a simple feeling of weariness or "boredom" to downright depression of spirits, or even melancholy.

It is also periodic in its character. Patients themselves say their ailments come and go according to the state of the atmosphere. In some parts of England—Staffordshire, for instance—it is no uncommon thing to hear people talk about being "under the weather." Well, the weather, like that unfortunate organ the liver, has to put up with a deal of abuse. But nervous people are far more easily affected by atmospheric changes than others.

The symptoms of *ennui* are so numerous, and vary so much with different individuals, that I need merely summarise them, and that itself I can only do imperfectly. They are those of nervousness and debility combined. Their periodicity even adds to their distressfulness. The sufferer or patient is well and happy one day, and weak and peevish the next, or may continue ill for a week or a month, then suddenly brighten up, only to relapse once more into the old condition in a short time.

And yet all the while he or she may be unable to point to any particular organ as the aching one, or say where the trouble lies. Some sufferers consult medical men; these are the cases in which bodily symptoms are in the ascendancy: where there are stomachic troubles, flying pains, headache, &c. Others suffer without seeking for aid; in such cases the mental miseries are worse than the bodily. They do not care

to call in a medical man, or even consult him in his house. I have known a person so afflicted to send for a doctor, and then refuse to see him.

But the rule is for the sufferer from *ennui* not to seek for skilled advice at all, though he may readily enough tell his troubles to a friend, and probably actually feel pleased to know that there are other people in the world who are just as bad as, and even worse than he is.

I think myself that the case is bad enough, and deserves commiseration, when a man feels really ill—bodily and mentally ill—and yet cannot summon up the resolution to consult a physician.

It is in the very nature of his complaint to despair of relief.

“What would be the good,” he says to himself, “of consulting a doctor? That would be giving in altogether. I don’t want to consider myself actually sick. The doctor might do one of three things: he might laugh at me, or he might be too polite for that, and merely give me a lot of good advice and a lot of physic and stuff, the former of which I should forget, and the latter pitch away; or, worst of all, he might discover some hidden disorder that must soon prove fatal, and *tell me so*, for some doctors have a nasty way of ‘putting on the black cap.’ Besides, I believe my troubles are all fancy, or I’m over-worked and over-worried. I *must* bear up. It will all come right in the end, though I must confess I feel a miserable wretch.”

A person of this kind is always going to do something, always going in for something, but in most cases his good resolutions never lead to anything very practical. The truth is, he wants guidance.

A distressing symptom is that mentioned by the old physician from whom I quoted: bad sleep and restless nights. But this is not always the case, for if bile predominates in the blood, or if the blood be insufficiently aerated from want of exposure during the day to a free current of wholesome air, there is a lethargic, thick-headed kind of sleep, which passes the weary hours of night away after a fashion, but does not bring much refreshment.

The causes of *ennui* are manifold, and differ in different cases. I believe that in the vast majority of instances the patients themselves know a good deal more about the cause of their ailment than any doctor could, for I do not believe there is a man, or woman either, in these islands who is so ignorant as not to be aware that direct disobedience to the ordinary laws of health must entail bodily trouble, and even mental torture of some kind, sooner or later.

“*Ennui* is often caused by idleness,” so we are told, but I, for one, do not believe that idleness alone produces *ennui*. Let me here explain that the ailment is not a mere whimsical one: it has its seat in the brain, and I maintain that, from the very day it commences, changes in the brain-matter of a physiological nature have already begun. Idleness alone will not produce this changed condition of cerebral matter.

Take a healthy man, and throw him into a dungeon for years, you will not induce the disease we call *ennui*; no—he will make a companion of a spider or mouse, or he will plait straws, or construct puzzles therefrom; but depend upon it, he will find employment of some kind, and in that employment pleasure. But if you were to over-feed him, why, then you would have *ennui*, and the case might end in madness.

Ennui—I speak advisedly and from experience—is a disease of the temperate zones and of civilised peoples. Among the languid, idle inhabitants of the torrid zone, it is unknown. Among the hardier and harder inhabitants of the far north it does not exist. And why? Because the latter, although they may live as high as we do, take more exercise, and breathe a stronger air, while the former are free from it owing to the abstemious nature of their diet.

These facts—and facts they are—almost alone suggest a cure for this peculiar ailment of “advanced civilisation.” And I might add that the simple natives of the torrids do not drink tea or coffee, or smoke to the extent we do.

And now, what am I to say about the treatment of this complaint? Nothing individually, that is obvious. Shall we seek for a panacea in the Pharmacopœia? Alas! there is none. And yet I do not bid the sufferer despair. On the contrary, I preach hope. At present he may see all things dark and dim, “as through a glass:” it is in the very nature of his complaint so to look at matters. He must take heart of grace. Shall he make an attempt to shake off his trouble? No; the effort would end in failure and further exhaustion. But I will not have him sit indoors gazing outwards at the gloomy weather, and inwards at the gloom on his own mind. Without actually forcing himself to any great exertions, either mental or bodily, he must not sit idle and worry. He cannot force a cure; he may induce one, though, by degrees.

If he believes that the ailment from which he is suffering is to a great extent a blood disease, he will have made a good start towards recovery. He must get his blood purified. He must live abstemiously; eat but little, *especially if weak*. The mistake weakly people constantly make is forcing into their systems food which cannot be digested, and continues to poison the blood; or they drench themselves with tonics, in doing which they are but breeding heat and fever; or they take stimulants. This last is almost a fatal mistake, for the brain of one suffering from *ennui* is far too weak to bear stimulation. By-and-by, when the sufferer feels lighter, happier, and more hopeful, then tonics may be begun most cautiously—mild vegetable tonics first, with cod-liver oil.

The cure will be complete only after months of living by rule, the daily use of the bath, and all the healthful exercise possible, with—this is a *sine quâ non*—something to occupy, without harassing, the mind.

