AMERICAN NERVOUSNESS

ITS CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

A SUPPLEMENT TO NERVOUS EXHAUSTION
(NEURASTHENIA)

BY

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PREFACE.

THIS work is designed as a supplement to my lately published work on Neurasthenia (Nervous Exhaustion).

That work, though it appeared but one year ago, speedily passed to a second edition in this country, and has already been translated into German. It is just to infer that at last, after long delay, an audience has been found for a scientific discussion of this class of subjects.

In the preface to Nervous Exhaustion it was stated that the chapter on the causes was designedly omitted, inasmuch as a thorough elucidation of that side of the subject, in all its relations and dependencies, would be of so complex a character as to require a special volume of itself. The present work is, therefore, to be regarded as a chapter on causes for the treatise on Nervous Exhaustion, with these qualifications — that it embraces the whole domain of nerve sensitiveness and nerve susceptibility, that lead to the more definite condition of nervous exhaustion, and that it is of a more distinctly philo-

sophical and popular character than that treatise, which was specially addressed to the professional and scientific reader.

The various subjects discussed in this work have occupied my mind from the time when I first began to think; in the form in which they now appear they represent not far from a quarter of a century of research and toil; many of the sections having been so often re-written and re-cast, that they bear little resemblance to their original form. The criticism which will be given to the philosophy of this work has been to a considerable degree anticipated, since the researches, and generalizations based on the researches, have been published by me, in various ways, during the last fifteen years; and most of them have been extensively published and republished in England and Germany; and thus have repeatedly, and in various forms, received the attention of some of the strongest critics of our generation. Replies to these critics and improvements in the mode of statement inspired by their suggestions, will be found in the present volume. Among these criticisms, especially noteworthy are those of the London *Times*, London *Spectator*, and *Saturday Review*; in Germany there has been endorsement rather than criticism. Although the general philosophy of this work is, in substance, the same as that contained in my earlier writings on the same subject, yet, in details and

illustrations, and in the arrangement and methods of argumentation, very many additions have been made which are here published for the first time. Many of the distinctive thoughts of this work are found in my lecture on American Nervousness given before the Medical and Surgical Society of Baltimore, and subsequently published in the *Virginia Medical Journal*, and in pamphlet form, and in papers on "English and American Physique," in the *North American Review*, on "The Future of the American People," in the *Atlantic Monthly* and on "The Consolations of the Nervous," in *Appleton's Journal*, and in a series of articles in the *Yale College Courant*. More recently I lectured on the general subject before the Philosophical Society of Chicago.

Some of the points have also been touched upon in a series of papers recently given through the New York *Medical Record*, in my paper on Writer's Cramp; also in my work on "Hay-Fever," and on "Neurasthenia" (Nervous Exhaustion), and in Beard and Rockwell's "Medical and Surgical Electricity." In a paper read before the British Medical Association, in Cork, 1879, and Cambridge in 1880, I also discussed the problems raised in this volume and the one that it supplements.

Throughout this book references and foot notes are resorted to but occasionally, since to make the list of authorities of sources of facts complete

would require another volume at least half the size of the present one.

To those who are beginning the study of this interesting theme the following epitome of the philosophy of this work may be of assistance, as a preliminary to a detailed examination.

First. Nervousness is strictly deficiency or lack of nerve-force. This condition, together with all the symptoms of diseases that are evolved from it, has developed mainly within the nineteenth century, and is especially frequent and severe in the Northern and Eastern portions of the United States. Nervousness, in the sense here used, is to be distinguished rigidly and systematically from simple excess of emotion and from organic disease.

Secondly. The chief and primary cause of this development and very rapid increase of nervousness is *modern civilization*, which is distinguished from the ancient by these five characteristics: steam-power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women.

Civilization is the one constant factor without which there can be little or no nervousness, and under which in its modern form nervousness in its many varieties must arise inevitably. Among the secondary and tertiary causes of nervousness are, climate, institutions—civil, political, and religious, social and business—personal habits, indulgence of appetites and passions.

Third. These secondary and tertiary causes are of themselves without power to induce nervousness, save when they supplement and are interwoven with the modern forms of civilization.

Fourth. The sign and type of functional nervous diseases that are evolved out of this general nerve sensitiveness is, neurasthenia (nervous exhaustion), which is in close and constant relation with such functional nerve maladies as certain physical forms of hysteria, hay-fever, sick-headache, inebriety, and some phases of insanity; is, indeed, a branch whence at early or later stages of growth these diseases may take their origin.

Fifth. The greater prevalence of nervousness in America is a complex resultant of a number of influences, the chief of which are dryness of the air, extremes of heat and cold, civil and religious liberty, and the great mental activity made necessary and possible in a new and productive country under such climatic conditions.

A new crop of diseases has sprung up in America, of which Great Britain until lately knew nothing, or but little. A class of functional diseases of the nervous system, now beginning to be known everywhere in civilization, seem to have first taken root under an American sky, whence their seed is being distributed.

All this is modern, and originally American; and no age, no country, and no form of civilization,

Some of the views herein contained have passed long since through the three stages through which all new truths must pass before they enter into the fellowship of science; the stage of indifference, the stage of denial, the stage of contests of priority; others are passing out of the second and third of these stages, and others still have not yet passed, or are but beginning to pass out of the era of indifference. It is worthy of comment that some of the most iconoclastic of the truths here announced, those which, when first made known, years since, were believed to indicate insanity on the part of the author, and were felt to threaten the stability of the science to which they belong, have already become so interwoven with our medical literature, that their philosophy and their terminology are met with every day and every hour in reading and in conversation; out of these researches a number of books have been published, in Europe and America, and numbers more, as I learn, are in preparation; in this new and immense field, there is room for an army of workers.

But despite all this rapid adoption and popularization of these facts, their reception is yet, and for a long future must remain, very far from being unanimous; indeed, only among the leading experts can they be said to have gained complete and unwavering acceptance; with the great body of

science young and old, these truths are as though they had never been; in all our cyclopedias of medicine, the terms hysteria, somnambulism, ecstasy, catalepsy, mimicry of disease, spinal congestion, incipient ataxy, epilepsy, spasms and congestions, anemias and hyperemias alcoholism, spinal irritation, spinal exhaustion, cerebral paresis, cerebral exhaustion and irritation, nervousness and imagination are thrown together recklessly, confusedly, hopelessly as in a witches caldron; and in all, and through all, one shall look vainly—save here and there, for an intelligent and differential description of neurasthenia, the most frequent, the most important, the most interesting nervous disease of our time, or of any time; still hay-fever is classed as parasitic or infectious, although as justly insanity or epilepsy or neuralgia might be similarly classed; still inebriety or dipsomania, is either not mentioned at all or grotesquely confounded with alcoholism or epilepsy; still our medical graduates, after years spent in listening to lectures, must wait for their diploma before they are even ready to begin the study of this side of the nervous system. Meantime the literature of ataxia, which is but an atom compared with the world of functional nervous diseases, has risen and yet rising with infinite repetitions and revolutions to volumes and volumes.

The researches on the longevity of brain-work-

ers have a history which, at this stage, as an encouragement to young men who are giving themselves to original work, may properly be given here. The investigations on this subject were made by me while a student of medicine, were given as a lecture before an association of army and navy surgeons in New Orleans, were then put in a graduating thesis, which not only received no prize, but not even an honorable mention. A popular essay based on these researches, after being rejected by one magazine was finally published in the "Hours at Home," when all its statistics and reasonings were called in question; after being put in a somewhat different form the same was published in the first volume of the "Transactions of the American Health Association," and there for the first time, through the transactions and through the reprint, was fairly brought before the scientific world, and for the first time began to have an audience. The essay was reprinted in England in the London Journal of Science, and a full abstract was published in Germany, with the statement, that it was an evidence of the progress of science in the United States that such researches could be made here. Within the last few years the views of that essay have been passing into general acceptance in the scientific world; some of them having been used of late as a base line whence to attack other

researches contained in this book. The philosophy and the facts which have met with so complete an endorsement, were in substance those contained in that graduating thesis which now rests in peace in the archives of my alma mater.

The philosophy of the work of neurasthenia of which the present work is a supplement, after a long period of indifference — has passed in the mind of many, if not the majority of experts on nervous diseases, through the three stages which new truths are destined to pass — so that, now we hear little but the dying away echoes of the contest of priority which always attends the latter part of the last stage in the evolution of ideas.

At the late meeting of the British Medical Association Dr. Crichton-Browne gave an address on this subject accurately stating and confirming my conclusions in regard to the increase of nervous diseases, and advocating throughout much of the philosophy embraced in that portion of this work which is devoted to the signs and causes of nervous exhaustion; and he also added some very suggestive and well-stated observations of his own; even going so far as to assert that the English are growing thinner, that they weigh less than their ancestors of a century ago.

The law of the relation of age to work which is announced and demonstrated in the chapter on

longevity of brain-workers has not yet been accepted by any considerable number of human beings so far as known to me, and it is scarcely probable that it will be accepted, although it is easier of demonstration and absolute verification than any of the facts that are contained in these researches; men feel as though this discovery were an attack upon the human race, and by the instincts of self-preservation every one is enlisted to oppose it. It is probable, therefore, although any one with a cyclopedia can confirm all that I claim to have discovered on this subject, that a yet higher and wider development of the scientific sense will be required before even experts in pyschology shall be ready to receive a scientific truth so opposed to the almost universal convictions of mankind.

When, a number of years ago, I formulated some of the signs and proofs of this increasing nervousness, there was scarcely a responsive voice in any country; but the strongest, most numerous and comprehensive endorsements these views have obtained have thus far been in Germany and England more than in the United States, which is the nervous country by pre-eminence. So far as I know, there has been no hostile criticism of this philosophy in Germany, but in England, even now, these views are not unanimously sustained. At the time that Dr. Crichton-Browne gave his essay in which he

not only asserted all that I had claimed on the increase of nervousness, but went even farther than I should have dared to go, on their increase in England, the distinguished microscopist, Dr. Lionel Beale, published a work on "Slight Ailments," in which he had occasion to refer to nervousness and to my researches in that subject, and he denies that there has been any increase; and implies that if our fathers had observed properly, they would have found as much as their descendants. Philosophy of this kind comes partly from defective observation; but more, it is to be feared, from defective reasoning; from conjoined inability and unwillingness to trace detailed facts back to the general laws whence they flow, or to take a wide survey of intricate and difficult problems. If this philosophy be driven to its logical conclusion, it must assert that, on the banks of the Nile and the Amazon, among the fading-away Indian tribes of our continent, in Greenland, in Iceland, in Lapland, in Russia, in China, in Turkey, in Australia, in India, in Japan, and in the Cannibal Islands there is just as much hay-fever, just as much epilepsy, just as much inebriety and insanity, just as much neurasthenia, as many phases of insomnia, of headache, just as much near-sightedness, as much hypochondria, hysteria, chorea, and as much mental and physical debility as there is in London and New

York. A conclusion so unscientific and non-accordant with general — to say nothing of special — observation, is a thousand times over refuted by facts contained in this volume; and that at this late hour, this delusion survives in scientific society is an argument more potent than all others I know, for such a re-construction of our system of education as shall make reasoning of that kind among educated men impossible.

The *London Times* in commenting on some of the views here brought forth has assumed and stated that I deplore the necessity of stating them. An inference so erroneous I trust may not be drawn from the present volume. Science fears not, nor does it hope — it does not even expect; but takes all that it finds in nature and makes it its own, trusting all, receiving all, and with equal welcome.

It has been said, it will be said here, that these subjects are unworthy of science, and that the time and force of scientific men expended upon them might have been more wisely used in other realms; and it will be urged, as it has been urged, upon those who would make the wisest use of their powers, to give little heed to the scientific study of this side of psychology and sociology.

As compared with politics, a topic like this must seem, and especially in a land like ours, very small indeed; so that only when we fix our eyes

most closely upon it, is it possible to see it at all; but it is the office, the nature, the essence and the life of science to ennoble the ignoble, and out of smallness and meanness to evolve greatness and beauty; all science that is now known is but the organization of phenomena of nature that men have thought to be too trifling for the solemn attention of the human mind.

The philosophic study of the several branches of sociology, politics, charities, history, education, shall never be even in the direction of scientific precision or completeness until it shall have absorbed some, at least, of the suggestions of this problem of American Nervousness. We are, therefore, called to its study by the very presence in our minds of the seemingly weightier matters that would drive it out of sight; we are called to it by politics itself, which American youth are taught is the only theme worthy the attention of an ambitious nature; by the problems of merchandise, of invention, of property, and of social order. This subject also calls us to its study by the chance it gives through widely-opened doors for original, creative, pioneering, and productive work that shall make Europe follow us, instead of our following Europe. Long enough this babyland of science has fed on the crumbs that fall from Germany's table; corn and fruits we are carrying to the old country; let

new ideas, and crops of fresh discoveries go with them. Better to criticise and confirm than to be idle; but wiser far to make others criticise and confirm. If we will cease to cross the sea in our search of materials for thought, and take those that fall in full showers at our doorsteps, we shall do our best service for other lands as well as for our own.

The hope may be expressed — that this theme may not be judged by the imperfectness and inexpertness of its representative; the insignificance of the author may weaken, but cannot destroy his cause; for, as little children sometimes return homeward from their play so laden and covered over with wreaths and flowers that they themselves are hidden, so this subject by its richness and importance quite conceals and overshadows its advocate.

G. M. B.

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