

**THE NEW-
ENGLAND INVALID**

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The New-England invalid by Robert T. Edes

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ROBERT T. EDES

**THE NEW-
ENGLAND INVALID**

The Shattuck Lecture,
1895.

THE
NEW-ENGLAND INVALID.

By ROBERT T. EDES, M.D.

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THE NEW-ENGLAND INVALID.

THE provisions under which the Shattuck lectureship was established specify "Historical and other essays on the climate of Massachusetts or the diseases of its inhabitants, or such other subjects as said Society or its government may select."

These alternatives are surely liberal enough, and the committee have given me not the least hint to limit my choice, but it certainly seems in accordance with the wishes of the founder that some matter of decided local interest should be discussed in the discourse provided for by his liberality.

Common report and more or less jocose remarks attach the name of New England to one at least of the supposable causes of nervous affections. How justly is another matter, but it hardly requires this facetious etiology to make it appropriate for me to choose as my subject one which must have for every one of you, not strangely and exceptionally favored by fortune, a deep professional and often personal interest.

An eminent physician, not herself a native of New England, who looks upon a relative impairment of the reproductive functions as largely a phenomenon, though a highly complicated one, of acclimation and as closely connected with the neurotic constitution, says that "*it should* be more conspicuous in New England, whose rigorous climate differs more from that of old England than does the climate of the Middle States."^{*}

* Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi: MS.

Statistics, I think it is not rash to assume, are unobtainable as to the relative frequency of nervous invalidism in different portions of this country.

Inquiries of colleagues, whose wide and varied experience extends over more degrees of latitude than my own, have furnished me only with impressions, that less invalidism prevails north and south of the densely populated strip of coast from Boston to Washington and the great cities west of it. This, however, has undoubtedly far greater reference to mode of life than to climate, except so far as the latter influences the amount of out-door life.

Americans are called a nervous people. In fact nervousness has been called the American disease.

Can we easily believe otherwise when we consider how rapidly the proportion of city dwellers is on the increase, and then the "fundamental morbid social conditions and tendencies which give rise to the nerve-shattering character of the life in great cities. To the city throng, especially those classes of the population which are discontented with their social position and seek to better it, the clerk and store-keeper who wishes to become a merchant and millionaire, the mechanic who would make of himself a manufacturer, the artist, writer, and specialist who thirsts for gold and distinction, the official who looks for a swift promotion; and, not less, the country laborer who hopes to find there better wages and more enjoyable life. All these meet, in their struggles to better their circumstances, a crowd of competitors who look and strive just as eagerly after the shining mammon, after the idol of fame and distinction beckoning in the distance; and are not always careful of their means of reaching it. Then all the strength must be exerted, and if the nervous tension is not sufficient for the demands upon it, it must be helped with stimulants; tea and coffee and strong cigars must be made to spur on the jaded nerves, and hypnotics force a troubled sleep."

You give me credit perhaps for a very good piece of description and a just appreciation of our dangerous conditions; but undeservedly so. These last sentences do not describe Boston or Chicago, but are from a writer in the quiet city of Munich, supposed to be devoted to classical art and to beer. Here can be no restless political ambition, no worship of the almighty dollar, no complicated American drinks.

This author (Lowenfeld) explicitly rejects the claim of Beard for nervous prostration as an American peculiarity.

Is not the disposing cause the spirit of the times and not the spirit of the country? Nervousness attacks the centres of civilization and of great interests, because there are concentrated those whose nervous disposition renders them more sensitive to the irritations of unrest, discontent and worry.

Whether we have more than our share is not easy to say; it would certainly not be strange if it were so. But there is no doubt that we have enough to make the subject one of the highest importance.

There are directions in which a historical treatment of the subject might be made very interesting, but neither my time, my opportunities nor my sense of what is due to this Society have permitted me to offer a resumé of the literature instead of my own gleanings, however scanty, from a field unfortunately only too familiar to most of you.

The question as to the gradual increase of nervousness, of nervous invalidism, like that of insanity, is a very interesting one, but, again like that, a difficult one to answer with precision; even more so in our case, since we have not even the approximately accurate information of hospital and census returns.

It must, of course, be admitted that these are not conclusive. And that any apparent increase of recorded insanity, instead of showing a progressive deterioration, is

more likely, on the contrary, to be an index of more careful diagnosis and more efficient treatment, we are glad to believe.

Even such an approximation as a comparison of these returns afford, we cannot have in a matter so much less distinct, and affecting the community legally and financially so much less than does insanity. When the question of the relative health of successive generations comes up, one is apt to hear that some one remembers his grandmother or his great-grandmother who had a very large family and hardly knew a sick day. This, however, is not so conclusive as it appears, for it is most probable that it is one out of two grandmothers or four great-grandmothers who had the large family who is best recollected, while the other three who had only one or two children have naturally left fewer descendants to sing their praises; or, what is much more to the purpose, one remembers his robust grandmother better than he does his invalid great-aunt.

Neurasthenia has not been long enough separated off as a distinct condition to have accumulated around itself a mass of ancient literature.

Hysteria, however, has done so, and its columns in the Index Catalogue of the Surgeon General's Library number 34, including 210 titles of books on the general subject alone, going back to the latter part of the seventeenth century and becoming quite numerous in the early part of the eighteenth.

If, however, we accept, as I think we are justified in doing, miracle cures in the case of young women invalids, as very strong presumptive evidence of some kind of purely functional nervous affection, we can hardly say when we begin to get such cases.

I hope I shall not be accused of irreverence if I say that some of the miracles of the New Testament seem to have been of this kind. Hysterical trance is not an excessively



rare phenomenon, the Jews are notoriously a neurotic race, and such cases have been mistaken for real death.

Cases and epidemics, evidently hysterical, are not rare in history, although of course it is those of a violent and, so to speak, picturesque character which are more likely to be recorded than the neurasthenic and bedridden types.

Even if it turns out that nervous invalidism is not a disease exclusively of the present century, or of Massachusetts, or of New England, it is certainly not necessary to tell you that the conditions at work to produce it are as abundantly present here and now as anywhere, and it would only be a reminder of a considerable portion of your own labor, anxiety and trouble if I were to insist upon the importance and living interest of the subject to every one of you.

The New-England invalid is with us all. The old doctor has carried her all his professional life, and yet she is ready to bestow the care of herself upon the young man just making his reputation, and proud to be trusted where so many have failed. No specialist can escape her, for she has a symptom for every organ. The physician cannot dispose of her to the surgeon, for, after her braces have given out, after her spine has been shortened by a vertebra or two, after her pelvis and her pocket book are alike empty, she comes back to him "needing ONLY to be built up."

The surgeon can never flatter himself that he has seen the last of her, for when her ovaries and uterus have been safely bottled up where they can do no more harm, her kidneys may desert their proper sphere, descending to carry on the nefarious practices of their predecessors at the old place, or his first operations are successful only in providing a new location for a pain, to be cured by another.

But your troubles are the least. You see her occasionally. You must go, to be sure, when you know there is nothing to be done and you have not the time to do it. You must listen to the thrice told tale of symptoms which you

are as morally sure have nothing to do with any tangible lesion as if you had the patient upon the dissecting table. You must prescribe drugs which you know are useless and which you hope are inert, because you must appear to do something, or, worse yet, you may be driven to use those which are worse than useless, and which you too well know are not inert, because the necessity is absolutely forced upon you, and you cannot bear the charge of wanton cruelty, hoping that at some future day their use can be easily abandoned.

You are doing the most discouraging of work. You feel that you are in a treadmill from which there is no escape until you can resign your burden to another whose ignorance will give him enthusiasm, or are dropped discredited for a newer sensation.

But the mothers and the sisters, the husbands! for whom there is no holiday. The unwearying response to the constant call for relief from the pain which it is no satisfaction to them to call "functional irritation," from the distresses, the burnings, the flutterings, the quiverings, the throbbings, the tensions, the relaxations; the reproaches for indifference, the accusations of selfishness and the more trying repentance therefor, the ostentatious resignation of the misunderstood, the sympathy which they crave, the constant outflow of nervous force for which there is no adequate resupply in a confident hope of recovery; is it strange that we hear so often: "If you cannot take her there will soon be another?"

Is she not worth studying?

Among the earliest to call attention to the health of American women as a class, and not simply with a view to the treatment of individual cases, was Miss Catherine Beecher in her "Letters to the People on Health and Happiness," published now some forty years ago.

Without pretending to speak from a strictly medical point of view, but rather as an experienced teacher and