

Nervous Invalids Back on a Peace Basis

War's Compensatory Outlets Closed, the Neurologists' Waiting Rooms Are Crowded Again, and the Sanitaria for the Newly and Idly Rich Are Booming

By HELEN BULLITT LOWRY.

(Illustrated by George Van Werveke.)

"Oh, yes, my practice was nearly wrecked during the war," said the famous neurologist, psychologist, and half a dozen other of those nerve specialist things.

"How about now?" I inquired solicitously.

"Bully," replied the doctor. "They're all back, only more so. Even Mrs. Blank has returned." He looked reminiscently to the ceiling. "She'd been a weekly visitor in my office for years. Then one day she called me up and told me apologetically that she hadn't had time to think of her symptoms that week, so she had nothing to report—anyway she didn't believe that she could possibly find time to drop in at the office—she was so busy at the canteen. But she's back now," added the doctor grimly.

They're all back, it seems—that neurotic clan of wealthy women, ranging from hysterical debutantes to idle spinsters—from the victims of coddling husbands to "misunderstood wives." Before the war their favorite indoor sport was symptoms. From April, 1917, to November, 1918, the neurosthenic market had a sensational slump. But the war is over—for the ladies if not for prohibitionists.

According to this neurologist, the return of the nervous invalid is due to a variety of causes—not least among them the simple fact that she is idle again. But idleness is not all. She is also suffering from the physical weariness of the war and from subtle war reactions. As he explains the matter, it is all highly scientific, fearfully mysterious, and a bit unprintable. The causes that are filling up the sanatoria with nervous breakdowns are all mixed up with psychoanalysis, just as they were before the war. "War work," it seems, had furnished "compensatory outlets."

"Young girls," said the doctor, "whose sole end in life had been to succeed in society and to make a 'suitable match' got down on their hands and knees and scrubbed the floors of canteens and hospitals. They had no time for introspection. Moreover, they had an emotional outlet, since patriotism is as intense an experience as religion."

Next he took up the "spinster class," which quite evidently he doesn't include in the "debutante" classification.

"I have many such neurasthenic spinsters—women whose lives are spent entirely with other women. They found in the war a solution for their complexes. They would be outraged were they told that a part of their joy of giving was that men received the benefits of their service. In hospitals in France and in canteens on this side my nervous invalids were tireless. They were like a little ninety-pound woman when her house is afire, and a 300-pound safe of the family treasures must be thrown out of the window. She can do it—because the inhibitions which she has placed upon her strength are removed.

"But now they have remembered that they are 'delicate,'" he added with a sigh. "There are not many soldiers left to serve, and so the women are back on my hands. And I have to try to find jobs for them. I hoped I might interest a few of them in Mexico," a bit hopefully. "But it is much harder to place my wealthy ex-war workers than it is for the Government Employment Agency to place its men."

Then there are the tamperers with the occult, which are doing their part to reorganize the sanatoria with nice expensive patients.

"In England, it was perfectly natural and excusable that there should be a wave of spiritualism. Hardly a home but had suffered bereavement! But the



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class of women who have taken up spiritualism in this country have gone at it as a fad. The ouija board has sent me more patients than I have hours in the day. Women, with mentalities fitted to cope with a Harold Bell Wright novel, are figuring out occult messages from the inaneappings and letters, and they are trading their minds for the privilege. The situation would be amusing were there not such tragedies stalking about as the result. One such tragedy is now waiting for me in the other room."

And so they crowd into the doctor's office and into the sanatorium—these women, with their complexes and their egoisms, their ouija boards, and their misunderstood natures. In this expensive little society drama of the nerves, staged in the sanatorium, "glands" also have their names on the program—long sonorous names like pituitary and supra-renal, for it seems that glands have more parts to play than that conspicuous new mythological rôle of a Ponce de Leon fountain, which has been getting so much space of late in the lay press—though it is an old enough story in the medical journals.

But with no such trifles as glands and psychoanalysis is Mme. la Masseuse bothered when she describes the simple story of the return of the sanatorium fiend. She does not even mention that thoroughly domesticated and quite respectable one, the thyroid gland.

"It is the newly rich of the war profiteers class that are the nervous invalids in the sanatoriums," says Madame. "They are all exhausted by the frantic effort to break into the society. Also," her voice lowers mysteriously, "they think it is a way to meet the real society—like sending their daughters to the fashionable boarding school."

Madame is employed professionally in several of those extravagant sanatoria. She it is who administers that choice brand of exercise which can be indulged in without turning over your own hand—and Madame has few illusions about her patients.

"Do you know that some of those women they pay \$1,000 a week when they carry their maids with them? And then there is the doctor and the night nurse and the day nurse and the hair specialist and the masseuse and the electric vibrator—oh, Meese, you cannot know all the foolish things they do, because you work and have not time for

foolish things! One time I am called to one of those ladies, and so I arrive with my little satchel. And there sit a doctor with his satchel, and there sit a hair specialist with her satchel, and there sit an osteopath, only he do not have a satchel because he need only his hands. And there we all sit until a maid come out and say that Madame have changed her mind, that she is too nervous to see any of us, and we would all be paid. We did not mind then—but, oh, Meese, what a mad man that doctor was!"

This particular "erratic" lady, according to Madame la Masseuse, became a practical busy woman during the war, and has not yet returned to the ranks of the neurasthenics. "But these new rich people, they do not know that it is no longer the fashion among the very best to be the nervous invalid," she confides. "Here they are with all this money to spend, and yet they know not how to get in—for, no matter how big checks they give to the charity, they are not invite, except to the large function—to the small select dinner, never. And so what shall they do? There is no longer the canteen.

"Ah, but there is the sanatorium, where they can meet almost anybody without the introduction. They can visit from room to room. There is much gossip—yes, have you heard that Mrs. W. is on the next floor, they tell each other. And always they can make the excuse to get into Mrs. W.'s room by mistake. And then it is easy, provided always they tell Mrs. W. how ill she look, and ask her so solicitously how are those fearful headaches. We, in my profession, we call them the rainbow chaser, and the sanatorium are to them the great convenience."

This is not the spirit in which the physician views the neurotic patient, if one may judge from an eminent specialist who has been conspicuously successful in treating "nervous indigestion." He is as patient as Job plus the Lady Griselda, and a couple of President Wilson's notes thrown in for good measure.

"In my entire practice I have not struck twenty genuine neurasthenic cases—that is, cases where there was not a mental or physical cause for the condition outside of the patient's control. It is the physician's business to find out what that cause is—without hiding behind the cloak of that sweeping diagnosis of neurasthenia, which is merely another

way of saying 'I don't know.' Ten years ago we consigned human beings ruthlessly to the scrap heap of neurasthenia."

"Many such patients," he explained, "particularly women, are merely suffering from a misunderstanding of the normal variations of the body. Often there is a history of some old disease which they fear will return. They begin positively to listen to their food digest. If there's a little hitch, the heavens have fallen! And the patient thinks that it is 'nervous indigestion,' if not cancer. To make that woman understand that the body cannot function like mechanical clockwork is the doctor's problem—to explain how there will normally be some misses—some days you must feel worse than on other days, even when you haven't been at a party the night before.

"This is the type of patient who was benefited by the war. She did not have time to worry about her normal variations—nor time to report them to the doctor if she did notice. I am inclined to think that many of these women will stay benefited—what with the able assistance of their new game of politics, which should prove a great resource for the wealthy dilettante. However, we will be having a new crop, quite as flourishing as the old. Scarcely three years now has the treatment of nervous disorders been truly scientific, so we can hardly hope for a clean release from all our old mistakes.

"To tell the truth," he added with a smile, "the greatest increase since the war to the practice of the nerve specialist has been men—shell-shock cases. No, I don't mean the men who got their shell-shock at the front. I mean the men who managed to keep out of the war. The man in the street sees only that there is a great deal of unessential explaining about 'why I did my bit in an essential industry.' But the neurologist is discovering that strange complexes are developing. Now that the war is over and it is too late, men are regretting. All their lives they see themselves explaining. And the neurologist is already beholding the results."

All these reactions of war on neurotics are experiences of New York, where the supply of doctors was never really reduced very far below the demand. One wonders what has happened back in a little Southern city which throughout the war was wiped almost clean of doctors.