

Burr (C. B.)

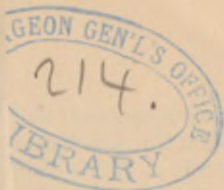
THE INSANITY OF MASTURBATION.

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A careful study of the symptomatology of mental disease develops the fact that cases of insanity having for their origin a like cause possess distinctive characteristics in common. This becomes the more clearly apparent in proportion as our investigation is more painstaking, and the scrutiny of symptoms more minute. The exciting causes of disease, the surroundings which favor its development, the age at which it makes its appearance, the general condition and circumstances of the patient, are believed not only to determine in a general way the form of disease, but also what its particular manifestations are to be, the character of delusions, and most unquestionably the curability or hopelessness of the malady.

Thus we have the insanity of pubescence, the insanity of adolescence, the insanity of the climacteric period, insanity from constitutional disease, and various other forms, each one presenting definite traits and diagnostic features. This association of cases in accordance with their natural history constitutes the clinical grouping of mental disease, and through it the alienist is furnished a useful and important classification.

Of the different types of insanity, none presents more uniform and distinctive symptoms than the one under consideration. The association of the habit of masturbation with insanity is shown by many striking signs which, if noticed at all, are frequently ascribed by the friends of patients to causes other than the true one.

Thus a mother observes that her son is growing quieter, more reserved, and low spirited, and that his health seems failing. He is indisposed to go out, and remains much by himself; is disinclined to see people, takes little interest in ordinary matters, and may be found deeply absorbed in reading, or lost in thought. Frequently it is the bible which engrosses his attention, or a religious experience is expressed, and it is thought that a spiritual awakening is taking place. As he grows pale, nervous, and languid, his malady is thought to be due to over-study, and his condition enlists the sympathy and warmest solicitude of others. As this deep reserve, however, is in many instances but an exaggeration of natural characteristics, the apprehension of friends as to any mental failure in the patient are not excited. It is some sudden, rash, impul-

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sive act, which leads them to suspect that something is wrong with his head, and even then they are loth to admit the existence of any serious mental disorder.

It is strange how often it is that the very flower of the family is stricken in this manner. "He was always a thoughtful, studious, amiable boy," his friends say; "was not rough like his companions, took very little interest in their sports, and was always devoted to his books." W. C., a boy of twenty-two, who was arrested for an attempt to shoot his father, but released from custody on the ground of insanity, and placed in the asylum, was thus described by his mother: "He was brought up in Sabbath school and day school more or less until nineteen years of age; was always very fond of reading, and but for the unkindness of his father at the age of fourteen or fifteen would have learned the printers' trade or telegraphing, and to-day have ranked among men as he wanted to, but no encouragement was given him in that direction, and here is the climax. He has seemed very reflective of late, and I have thought religion had something to do with his thoughts." She adds, also, that she hopes he will be led to salvation. Notwithstanding the high tribute from his mother, this patient's characteristics were found to be of the most unpleasant kind. He was irritable, vain, self-conceited, aggressive, and very belligerent. His suspicion was so great that at first he would not reply to any question, and resented attempts at familiarity. Two days after his admission he made assaults upon some feeble patients, and required to be removed from a quiet to a disturbed hall. He would walk about the hall with his hands raised, and making a strange noise, as if engaged in some religious exercise. He had hallucinations of hearing, was unappreciative of his condition, and was often rambling and incoherent in his conversation. He was obstinate and willful, and sought opportunities to annoy others. He addressed his fellow patients in a harsh, disagreeable tone, and elbowed the feebler ones about. At night he would disturb the hall by jumping in and out of bed, and whistling at the window. On one occasion while out walking, he clambered into a passing wagon, grabbed the lines, whipped up the horses, and drove some distance before the owner of the team could regain control of them. On another occasion he required removal from one hall to another, for committing an act of great indecency in a room. Full three months after admission, after having been composed and self-controlled for quite a long period, he made a brutal and violent assault upon an attendant while his back was turned. After being under treatment six months, this patient was removed at the request of his mother, who always felt that his detention in an asylum was a great hardship and injustice.

N. E., who was brought to the asylum after having procured a knife for the purpose of killing his mother, whom he thought was a devil, was always spoken of as a pattern of propriety, both by her and by his sisters. He was said to be

genial, amiable, industrious, and successful in his undertakings. This boy had periods of great irritability, was suspicious, vain, very self-conceited, and inclined to hold himself aloof from others. He entertained religious delusions, and believed that the knife he had sharpened to kill his mother with was predestined for that purpose.

Another patient who had made repeated assaults upon his father and mother, and shown great irritability if opposed, was, previous to his attack, "always retiring in tastes and unlike other boys."

A male, aged fourteen, who inherited a strong predisposition to mental disease, and was admitted to the asylum suffering from acute mania, was spoken of as a bright, studious, good boy, of kind disposition and pleasant manners, and free from bad habits. This patient, during convalescence, ascribed his entire trouble to vicious habits.

It is a most striking fact that those patients as a rule who suffer from mental disease in consequence of this vicious indulgence, possess an inherited tendency to nervous disorders. It would seem that the habit of masturbation operated toward the overthrow of the intellect chiefly in those cases where the nervous constitution is in some way defective, or abnormally susceptible to this and other exciting causes of insanity. As illustrative of this point, an analysis of cases may be of interest. Of the thirty-five patients admitted to the Eastern Michigan Asylum, since the first day of October, 1880, in whom masturbation was the undoubted cause of insanity, twenty-seven are found to inherit a predisposition to nervous or mental disease; in three cases such tendency cannot be positively stated, though the presumption is that it exists; five only are exempt from any hereditary taint as far as known.

Melancholia and dementia are the most frequent types of disease from this cause which are seen in asylums. Symptoms are continually changing however, and transitions from one state to another constantly occur. Thus in many cases, brief periods of mild excitement alternate with those of comparative composure, the length of the interval of quiet being dependent to a great extent upon the habits of the patient.

The tendency of all mental disease from this cause is toward irritable dementia, and perfect recovery is exceptional, this depending so largely as it does upon the ability of the patient to restrain morbid tendencies and correct vicious habits. Self-control is in many cases so nearly destroyed by the degrading vice that such coöperation is impracticable.

The excitement observed in connection with this form of insanity is of a purposeless character; is characterized by mischievous acts, erotic impulses, wanton deeds of violence, and destructive propensities. These patients mark the walls, destroy their clothing, are untidy in habits, lawless and excessively difficult to look after. In some instances mania assumes a chronic form, and periods of immunity from excitement are brief and imperfect.

The opposite condition, that of melancholia, is characterized by hallucinations, emotional disturbance, the existence of religious delusions, and a disposition to pray and confess sin. It is difficult to say just what the relation is between the abuse of the sexual organs and the development of the religious (?) nature, but this connection has been observed by all who are familiar with mental disease. Patients of this class read the scriptures diligently, talk on spiritual subjects, are given to praying and exhorting, and have much to say on the subject of morality. They deeply deplore their past sins, and allude to errors of youth, but point to the spotless purity of their present lives, and are strong in professions of rectitude. It has been held that these religious delusions originate in the fear of punishment for violation of nature's laws. (Skae mentions the prevalence of the belief that the unpardonable sin has been committed). For relief from this burden of guilt, consolation is sought in scripture reading and religious exercises, and the morbid fervor thus engendered eventually leads the patient to the opposite extreme. He believes himself highly moral, and superior to his associates and surroundings. Maudsley says:—

"Very remarkable is it what a strain of exalted sentiment and lofty idealism is professed in some of these cases; the world is too coarsely selfish and rudely practical for their fine sensibilities and nice aspirations, and notwithstanding that they are sunk in a degrading self indulgence, and perhaps emasculated by it, they will pour out loftily-pitched moral sentiments, and take it hotly to task in high conceited fashion for its low aims and gross ways."

Emotional states prevail in this class of cases, and attacks resembling hysteria in the female are not uncommon. The patient takes to bed, or falls in a lifeless manner to the floor; he has a feeble pulse, relaxed skin, and dilated pupils. There is either a feigning of unconsciousness, or complete absence of self-control, weeping, shouting, and active lamentation. This condition is ascribed to nervous exhaustion from over-stimulation of the sexual organs. It may be followed by a paroxysm of maniacal excitement.

The vanity and egotism of these patients are phenomenal. This is a noteworthy sign of mental failure, and increases with impairment of intellect. Many imagine themselves possessed of great gifts, and dwell with pride on their varied accomplishments. Some delight in a display of oratorical powers, others write poetry or compose music. There is a strong tendency to speak of the opposite sex, and the average lunatic of this class imagines himself possessed of boundless powers of fascination. These characteristics were exemplified to a marvelous degree in the following case: A male, aged twenty-six was admitted to the asylum about one year ago. His father says that he exhausted himself by study at the age of eighteen, and that his mind "went to pieces" then. He did not suffer from brain fever, but was confined to his bed and seemed to be out of his

head. When he got up he was left irritable and peculiar, unable to devote himself to any regular occupation or study, and without much purpose. At the end of a year he quarreled with a sister, and procuring money went to Kansas without the knowledge of his family. There he gained a bare subsistence, and at the end of eighteen months came home, ragged and wretched. His mind upon his return seemed much more active; he applied himself diligently to the study of law, and at the age of twenty-one was admitted to the bar. For some time he was associated in business with an older lawyer, and did pretty well in the way of making collections and practicing in the bankruptcy courts. In a year and a half he became impressed with an undue sense of his own importance, and established himself independently. In the course of a year his library was sold under a chattel mortgage to satisfy his rent. With the loss of his library he gave up, and for three years previous to his admission, did nothing for his own support. In Detroit he connected himself with one of the churches, and was quite a devoted attendant, but notwithstanding this his moral nature was very defective. His bearing while in the society of young ladies was objectionable, and on one occasion he narrowly escaped a cowhiding from an irate father, whose daughter he had insulted. There was, no doubt, progressive mental failure during these three years, but a relative, upon whom he depended for support, did not recognize the fact, and ascribed his growing irritability, indolence, and unpleasant characteristics to viciousness and sheer laziness. Finally this relative concluded he could care for him no longer. From Detroit he went to a neighboring city where his parents resided. There he made himself very obnoxious to young ladies by forcing his society upon them. He had a practice of staring at them in church, or at public entertainments, which was offensive in the extreme. He was addicted to poetry writing, and inflicted his productions upon whomsoever would accept. He had a scheme for "connecting water ways," and for "lake improvement," and made himself a great nuisance by his importunities to persons to purchase stock. Finally it became rumored that he was looking for the "girl who had jilted him," with a revolver, and being considered dangerous to be at large, he was placed in the asylum. When admitted he was suffering from a nervous disorder of the heart, and was reduced physically. He complained of pain in the back, suffered from constipation, believed that the bones of the spinal column were decaying, and thought that with every act of defecation portions of the spinal marrow escaped. He had many other delusions, among which was one that an explosive bullet had been administered to him in his food. He was listless, performed no active labor, and was indifferent to exercise. His vanity was excessive, his conversation was almost entirely about himself, and very self-laudatory; his poetry was reeled off to his auditors without mercy, and he delighted in displaying what he chose to believe was a highly cultivated voice. He

devoted much time to personal adornment, and would spend hours prinking and smirking before a mirror. In public gatherings he would face full about and stare at the ladies. During the first few months he seemed to improve, but this change was not a permanent one, and in six months material impairment of mind had taken place. He grew more irritable, wore a surly look, and complained of a feeling of great confusion. To his attendant he confessed without shame that his habits were improper at night, and ocular evidence corroborated his statement. It was also reported at this time that he was seen by a fellow patient exposing his person at the window. One evening he was cautioned by the physician in charge against such practices, whereupon he grew highly indignant. An hour afterwards he approached an attendant, who was standing in a group with others, and dealt him a murderous blow on the head with a champer. The assault was made without provocation. He had previously been on the best of terms with this attendant, and no words whatever had been exchanged between them that evening; neither had the attendant reported anything to his discredit, and this the patient well knew.

The sense of shame gradually becomes obscured and eventually is lost. Disgusting acts are committed, indecent exposures of person and improper advances are made, and open indulgence in the vicious habit is not uncommon. Women frequently entertain delusions appertaining to the union of the sexes. Many believe themselves to be married, others engaged. Others again allege that men have been improperly intimate with them. They all possess very susceptible affections, and in many instances a disappointment in love has been the assigned cause of insanity. No less than four female patients of this class, at present under treatment in the asylum, have delusions of this character.

Two cases have been received showing well marked suicidal tendencies. Such, however, are comparatively rare. One case was that of a male, aged nineteen, who had been a close student and aspired to be a school teacher. He had been a victim of this habit for a number of years, and had been the prey of quacks and impostors, who had excited his extreme apprehension, and kept constantly before him the bugbear of impotence. One of these quacks had advised a complete renovation of the system by a restricted diet. He adopted the starvation plan, and became so much reduced physically that at the time of admission he weighed but seventy-five pounds. He had been much disposed to wander about alone, and just previous to admission had attempted self-mutilation by cutting his tongue. He had religious delusions, and was disinclined to eat. With physical improvement his mind grew better, and at the end of six months he was discharged "recovered."

The other case was that of a female, aged twenty-five, who inherited a strong predisposition to mental disease. She had been failing in mind for upwards of a year, her malady being ascribed by her friends to disappointed affections. She

had imagined herself drugged and ruined, and claimed that she had been offered some indignity by a young man. She had twice attempted suicide, once by throwing herself into the river, and again by cutting her throat. This patient has become very degraded in habits, and her mind is greatly impaired. She entertains all her former delusions, is impulsive, violent, and disposed to make sudden assaults. Her prospects for recovery are very poor indeed.

Auditory and visual hallucinations are frequently found. In one case hallucinations of hearing were so intense and unremitting, as to almost completely destroy the comfort of the patient, and render him at times abject and miserable. Persecution from these evil spirits, as he was wont to style them, was occasionally so severe as to cause him to lose all self-control, to scream, and to cry out in agony. On one occasion he wrote to his father that "it is bother, bother, bother, all the time," and added, "insanity is a queer thing; persons who are not afflicted know not how much they suffer or how they feel. I have had spells come over me to strike people with my fists, or break the windows, but they were of short duration."

Another patient imagined that people made faces at him. He also heard himself mocked and accused of crime, and believed that a conspiracy was formed against him, to thwart him in all his undertakings. He had many other symptoms appertaining to this form of insanity, was irritable and excessively vain, and imagined himself a very superior person.

The tendency to the commission of sudden acts of violence has been alluded to, as a striking characteristic of this variety of mental disease. It has been illustrated in the cases mentioned, and instances might be multiplied. An hallucination or delusion (as in the case of N. E., who thought his mother a devil) may furnish the motive for an assault, or the attack is of an explosive character, is wanton, outrageous, and due to excessive irritability from sexual exhaustion, as in several of the cases quoted.

A patient was recently admitted to the asylum, whose case may be of interest in this connection. Some of the particulars recorded are doubtless familiar to certain members of the society. The patient, a male, aged twenty-nine years, was born in Germany and probably inherited from his mother a susceptible organization. He served three years in the army, then learned a trade and supported himself by his own exertion until five years ago, at which time he became deranged. He describes a sensation coming upon him then like a lightning stroke, which prostrated him temporarily, and gave him a severe pain in the back. In all probability he has never been well in mind from that time to the present. Soon after the attack he fell in love but did not marry—he says because he had no means. He has been in America most of the time for the past four years; has resided with a relative and worked at his trade. His mind has been unsettled, however. One year ago, in Jan-

uary, he again became anxious to marry. This, and other symptoms of mental disorder, induced his friends to send him to Germany for a six-months' sojourn. One month ago he met on the street of one of our cities a lady whom he had formerly seen in a vision, and whom he recognized as his "double life." Procuring a pistol he visited this lady's house, and demanded of her that she marry him. Upon her refusal so to do, he shot at her three times. For this deed he was arrested, but his insanity being undoubted, he was committed to the asylum. His manner is that of one who has been insane for a long time, and is the subject of persistent delusions. He had at first a restless, suspicious expression of countenance, but was quite communicative. His conversation is extravagant. Although he admits he has had little schooling, he believes with a better knowledge of the English language he would be the first lawyer in the land. He has no appreciation of his condition, and considers himself perfectly sound in body and mind. He has had many visions. In one of them a female appeared and took improper liberties with his person.

The physical symptoms associated with this form of mental disease are attributable to the general impaired state of the nervous system, particularly of the vaso-motor system. We find pain in the back and limbs, disorders of circulation, irregular action of the heart, dilated pupils, wet hands and a coated tongue. Disorders of sensation are occasionally observed. The patient complains of languor, lassitude, and a feeling of general weakness. He is indisposed to exercise. Constipation and general derangement of the secretions are more or less constantly present.

In the above paper I have endeavored to call attention to the delusions and peculiar manifestations which I regard as characteristic of this form of insanity. In brief these are:

- (1) An intense vanity and self-love;
- (2) Extreme selfishness and disregard for others;
- (3) Religious delusions and perverted moral sentiments;
- (4) Delusions referable to the sexual system;
- (5) Hallucinations of sight and hearing of a certain definite character;
- (6) Emotional disturbances;
- (7) Homicidal impulses and a disposition to commit sudden acts of violence; and
- (8) Certain physical disorders referable to an impaired state of the nervous system.

About ten per cent. of all patients under treatment at the Eastern Michigan Asylum, suffer from this form of mental disease. This I believe to be a much smaller percentage than is generally supposed.

While it is true that among the insane this vice is not infrequent, in many instances it is indulged in consequence of the impairment of will power from disease, and is regarded as one of the results rather than a cause of mental infirmity. Cases of this character I have excluded in the above estimate.





