

THE AMERICAN DISEASE: AN INTERPRETATION.*

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Medical nomenclature, certainly as regards names for many diseases, stands to-day the most neglected, the most incongruous, the least rational and the least progressive of all the minor divisions of the subject. Many of those most familiar justify a continued existence solely through the fallacious law of traditional custom. In some instances, both name and disease being inelastic—typhoid fever or epilepsy, for example—no special harm is done. In others, as hysteria and chorea, we continue to insult intelligence apparently without either consciousness of shame or hope or desire for reform. There is something of promise in the tuberculosis of to-day rather than the consumption of our fathers, but much remains to be done, the work having scarcely begun. The field of neurology, perhaps, more than any other, needs the scythe and pruning hook. The latter instrument could, in my judgment, be used with particularly beneficial effect if employed vigorously and with discriminating judgment in neurological nosology. Its first work, if in my hands, would be to clip and trim and shape into at least some semblance of definite form and substance that phantom, once a tree, now a forest and rapidly becoming a wilderness, so rank and riotous is its growth, neurasthenia. No shorter road to nervous prostration exists than along the route of present interpretation and mental comprehension of the term as generally understood or misunderstood. I confess to an antipathy—I think rational though amounting almost to an obsession—for the word. Originally intended to possess a definite significance, its field of application has been so elaborated and broadened and abused that to-day it means almost anything, and with equal truth almost nothing. The inspiration which gave it birth marked the genius, but the child has grown a monster, fattening upon the flesh of hundreds of brothers and sisters, and even its cousins. It is still from custom classed among the neuroses or psycho-neuroses and thus the special property of the neurologist, but like its twin sister—the only sister left, by the way—hysteria, it has wandered afar with an omnivorous appetite and is known to-day and claimed in some one of its hydra-headed forms in every field of medicine. To the stomach specialists belong the gastric and lithemic types, to the surgeon the post-operative and some of the traumatic cases. The sexual neurasthenic is the property of the genito-urinary specialists, the reflex cases are almost equally distributed to those who know the eye, the ear, the nose and throat, while the neurolo-

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