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Selections: Medicine.

THE SYMPTOM NUMBNESS.

CLINIC OF S. WEIR MITCHELL, M.D.

In the case before you, as in the last one which presented itself, the patient complained of feeling numbness in the extremities. I am not sorry to have the chance to say a few words to you on this subject. Numbness is the word used for several forms or varieties of sensations not found in health, or, I should say, in perfect health. It is used both by patients and doctors, but, whenever used, needs to be accurately described, and then related to the other symptoms present, before we can respect it as a defining symptom. To the patient who has experienced it for the first time, it is alarming, but really, like most symptoms, it is sometimes of much meaning, and sometimes of little.

In the present case, the patient, a hard-worked woman, with natural tendencies to easy emotional manifestations, emphasized, as these always are, by anæmia, tells us that she began to suffer last spring, from what she calls numbness of the feet and hands. We carefully question her, and learn that this means that, when tired or worried, she has a feeling as of the parts named being asleep; she calls it a "*prinking*;" that this is worse in the evenings, and that early in the morning she is free from it. The æsthesiometer shows that we have no loss of touch, and there is an absence of all signs of paralytic trouble in brain or cord; neither can I call this a hysterical symptom, although it is found in a hysterical woman. If forced to speculate on its cause, I should conclude it to

be due to defect of nerve nutrition in the extremities, and associate this with thin blood, under-feeding, and too constant work, with that which makes the cruel friction of all work, bodily and mental—worry.

But, speculate as we may, of this, at least, I am certain, and that is, of curing her; and, first, I shall assure her that this is not the kind of numbness which precedes paralysis. And what next shall I say to this wretched slave of work, this weakening, pallid girl, whose hysterical states have driven her parents to consent to any needed measure? It is vain to say take rest; the demands of home are unrelenting. It is useless to order good diet. With abundant food, the mechanic's wife knows of but one cooking utensil—the national frying pan. I shall take this girl into the hospital, and, setting mind and body both at rest, feed her well and often, and then, with good hope, give iron freely. It would be valueless to do this at her home, for iron is a drug which often fails to act without certain aids; and curable anæmia, once well established, may continue to exist under bountiful doses of iron, if only there be present some steady cause of moral disturbance, or some slight physical difficulty, some cause which gives annoyance or slight pain, or disturbs sleep; but, put these aside, and the iron becomes active for good. Indeed, to habitually over-worked folks, like some labourers and sewing women, an accident which puts them on their backs for five or six weeks in a well-ordered hospital is of great value. They get up again fat and well, and with what the people aptly call "a new lease of life."

But I have been led away from the subject