

SLEEPLESSNESS FROM THOUGHT.

The loss of power to cast off the burden of the day, and find rest in unconsciousness or forgetfulness at night, is one of the greatest of personal afflictions. Only those who have endured it know how terrible this experience, in its worst form, may prove. There is no escape anywhere, no respite, no—even momentary—lessening of the strain on the mind, when sleep is impossible; and the worry is increased when the mind, instead of finding ease, falls into a state in which every source of disquietude seems exaggerated. Sleeplessness of this sort is often the prelude—and it may be either the first indication, or itself the cause—of insanity. The condition into which the mind is thrown when endeavoring to sleep is essentially unsound, and tends to disease.

Physicians realizing the peril of the position give their patients a drug of some sort to procure sleep. They do this with the double purpose of breaking the habit of wakefulness when this has been formed, and of rescuing the mind from a condition in which it is unsafe. Those who adopt this treatment point to cases in which after a few doses of a sleep-potion, the sufferer has regained the power of falling asleep naturally. Such patients have undoubtedly been benefited by something, but it is still an open question whether the relief may not be due to mental influence rather than the medicine. However this may be, the point in which we are chiefly interested is the state which precedes and seems to bar sleep. We recognize its perils; in what way or by what means may they be avoided?

Examined closely, the condition of thought-worry preventing sleep will be found to be one in which the thinking faculty is beyond control. We may start a subject, but we cannot either keep the attention fixed, or compel thought to take rational and comparative views of the objects presented to it. There is a tendency to exaggeration, which the judgment is powerless to restrain or correct. There is at the same time another peculiarity, which throws more light on the nature of the condition, namely, an impulse to *repeat*; the mind goes over the same ground again and again. The explanation of this phenomenon is simple and suggestive; there is a perpetual endeavor to sleep, and although the circumstance may not be recognized, each train of thought breaks off at the precise moment when it ought to become a dream, and every recommencement is a new departure after a fresh act of wakefulness. The condition we are describing occurs on the road to sleep when the way is barred. The point to make clear is, that it is quite as likely the distressing thoughts of a sleepless person are the consequence of the wakefulness as that the inability to sleep is occasioned by thinking.

Thoughts, passing through the mind when the brain is falling into state of sleep, ought to be of a nature to change easily into a dream. The problem is to carry the mind over the boundary line, and convert what is conscious but uncontrollable thought into a dream. If this can be accomplished naturally—that is, without the aid of drugs, which stupefy the consciousness and burlesque the state of sleep rather than produce it—the subject of thought will be soon changed, and oblivion, or at least forgetfulness, induced. The solution of this problem may be attempted by either of two processes:

1. A particular thought, or train of thoughts, present to the mind may be seized upon at the moment of their occurrence, while as yet they are manageable, and turned into grotesque, thus preparing them to become the material or centre of an amusing dream. This method is less easy to describe than to carry out: but experience proves that it is abundantly efficacious. Fancy must be directed to play with the thought and weave a little scene or story out of its slenderest threads. Just enough effort to preserve the connection of ideas is necessary, or the expedient will fail, thought reverting to its former worrying courses. The secret of the method lies in holding the thought fixed, and projecting the train of ideas by fancy on a line which may carry it into dreamland, the dreaminess of thought inducing sleep. This is a perfectly natural and rational process, and it is harmless, whereas the production of stupefaction by drugs is artificial, and more or less perilous to brain and mind. The one lulls the consciousness to sleep, the other overpowers it with a poison.

2. The alternative mental method by which sleep may be sought consists in giving thought a monotonous task in the way suggested by those who can win sleep by counting, repeating, and the like expedients. This is more difficult in really bad cases of "sleeplessness from thought" than that first described, in which an idea, or train of ideas, already present to the mind, is converted into grotesque. The mind is not easily taken out of itself when engrossed with worrying topics, and, though fancying corn-fields and rising tides, or counting and piling up packages, or smoking an imaginary pipe and watching the clouds of tobacco smoke rise over the head, so as to direct the eyes upwards as in sleep, are good enough devices, it is not always practicable to shut out distressing or plaguing ideas, and concentrate the attention on these meaningless conceptions for the full success of which the sleep-walker needs a vacant rather than a harassed mind. It is an effort quite as great as the wakeful, but worried, can make, to turn a troublesome thought into grotesque imagery, but this is easier than to call up a wholly new and incongruous idea.

Perhaps the most general cause of sleepless-