

Mental Overpressure is Dangerous.

By Prof. Angelo Mosso.

INSANELY I destroyed my health by seven years' study at the time when I should have been laying the foundation of a good constitution." These words of Giacomo Leopardi sum up all there is to be said on the subject of mental overpressure. Generously he wished others to escape an evil from which he suffered so sadly in his own youth; and he adds: "I have most unhappily ruined myself for my whole life and rendered my appearance wretched and contemptible—all that great part of man which is the only thing whereof most people take any account."

Thus he lamented at 20 years of age, when, exhausted by thought, bowed by study and sleepless nights, he left the retirement of his ancestral estate of Recanati, where he had passed his joyless youth.

Certainly no other genius paid so high a compliment to nature. At 18 years of age he was so familiar with Latin and Greek that neither of these languages had any secrets from him; at 20 he rivaled as a poet the greatest bards of Greece. But the poetic talent and erudition which made him a miracle of our age sapped his constitution, leaving him an invalid for life and causing a melancholy which overclouded the spring time of his years.

Alexander von Humboldt says of himself: "I was 18 years of age, and yet knew nothing. My teachers foretold little or no good of me, but if I had adopted their methods and bent to their requirements both my body and my mind would have been ruined forever."

I have cited these two examples be-

cause they show that as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century the disastrous effects of over-pressure were thoroughly appreciated. It is only recently, however, that the attention of physicians and hygienists has been especially directed to the evil which over-pressure may work upon the youthful organism. It was in 1877, I think, at the congress of hygiene at Nuremberg, that Prof. Finkelburg spoke of this for the first time.

The conclusion of that congress was that the German school system interferes with physical development, more particularly with sight; that the brain work in the schools is excessive; and that physical culture is neglected.

Physiology cannot say for certain how much fatigue the brain is capable of standing without overpressure, nor at what precise age it can sustain fatigue without injury. Certainly it is never well before the sixth year to fatigue a child in school. On the other hand, moderate mental exercise assists the development of the brain, for, as physiologists say, function makes the organ. There is an intricate network of causes and effects, acting reciprocally one upon the other. A brain must be made to work, just as a field must be cultivated to prevent its running wild. But the instant that study begins exhausting it ceases to be useful. We should exercise the brain constantly, but never exhaust it.

When Cervantes wished to make Don Quixote mad he had him read much and sleep little. In this way his brain became enfeebled, and then it was good-bye to sound judgment. From this moment began those sublime extravagances with which we are all familiar.

Experimenters and artists work under the most favorable conditions, for

they alternate manual work with mental labor; but even among artists I have met characteristic examples of overstrain—produced usually by the continued contemplation of their mental images before they attempt with brush or chisel to reproduce them on canvas or in marble.

But among politicians and men of business overstrain is common. In proof of this one has only to consider that most terrible result of cerebral exhaustion—madness. In one of his writings Prof. Andrea Verga gives the Italian census of persons afflicted with madness during the years between 1874 and 1888; and he finds that the Jews furnish the largest contribution, the proportion among them exceeding three per 1,000. The same result is obtained in every country in Europe, and "must be attributed," says Verga, "to the feverish anxiety with which this strong and intelligent Semitic race pursue their interests."

But American politicians surpass in this respect the Jews of Europe. In the District of Columbia there are 5.20 cases of insanity per 1,000. This figure I have taken from Scribner's statistical tables, and I am ignorant of the cause of such an enormous proportion. In the state of Vermont, which stands next in the record, the proportion is only three per 1,000, while in Texas and other states the proportion decreases to .9 or to .5 per 1,000.

Men in political life, with few exceptions, wear themselves out by overwork and age rapidly. The correspondence of Cavour is full of allusions to the sleepless nights, and the profound exhaustion both of body and mind which his political campaigns cost him. A happy expression in his letters has struck me, one which he uses to indicate the necessity of rest after work.

He says that one must let the brain lie fallow, like a field that is allowed to rest, so that it may be sown again the next year.

Pinel, the founder of modern psychiatry, who was professor of mental diseases in Paris toward the end of the eighteenth century, showed that political revolutions deeply affected the nervous system of a nation and bring about an increase in the number of the insane. The late civil war in America was a confirmation on a large scale of this statement.

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