



***ABRAHAM
MYERSON***

***THE NERVOUS
HOUSEWIFE***

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By the Author of "RELIGION and HEALTH"

=HEALTH THROUGH WILL POWER=

By JAMES J. WALSH, M.D.

CHAPTER I

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INTRODUCTORY

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How old is the problem of the Nervous Housewife?

Did the semi-mythical Cave Man (who is perhaps only a pseudo-scientific creation) on his return from a prehistoric hunt find his leafy spouse all in tears over her staglocythic house-cleaning, or the conduct of the youngest cave child? Did she complain of her back, did she have a headache every time they disagreed, did she fuss and fret until he lost his patience and dashed madly out to the Cave Man's Refuge?

We cannot tell; we only know that all humor aside, and without reference to the past, the Nervous Housewife is surely a phenomenon of the present-day American home. In greater or less degree she is in every man's home; nor is she alone the rich Housewife with too little to do, for though riches do not protect, poverty predisposes, and the poor Housewife is far more frequently the victim of this disease of occupation. Every practicing physician, every hospital clinic, finds her a problem, evoking pity, concern, exasperation, and despair. She goes from specialist to specialist,—orthopedic surgeon, gynecologist, X-ray man, neurologist. By the time she has completed a course of treatment she has tasted all the drugs in the pharmacopeia, wears plates on her feet, spectacles on her nose, has had her teeth tinkered with, and her insides straightened; has had a

course in hydrotherapeutics, electrotherapeutics, osteopathy, and Christian Science!

Such is an extreme case; the minor cases pass through life burdened with pains and aches of the body and soul. And one of the commonest and saddest of transformations is the change of the gay, laughing young girl, radiant with love and all aglow at the thought of union with her man, into the housewife of a decade,—complaining, fatigued, and disillusioned. Bound to her husband by the ties the years and the children have brought, there is a wall of misunderstanding between them.

"Men don't understand," cries she. "Women are unreasonable," says he.

What are the causes of the change? Did the housewife of a past generation go through the same stage? Ask any man you meet and he will tell you his mother is or was more enduring than his wife. "She bore three times as many children; she did all her own housework; she baked more, cooked more, sewed more; she got up at five o'clock in the morning and went to bed at ten at night; she never went out, never had a vacation, did not know the meaning of manicure, pedicure, coiffure. She was contented, never extravagant, and rarely sick."

So the average man will say, and then: "Those were the good old days of simple living, gone like the dodo!" To-day, —well, it reminds me of a joke I heard. One man meets another and says: 'By the way, I heard that your wife was the champion athlete at college.' 'Ah, yes,' said the husband; 'now she is too weak to wash the dishes.'

Is the average man's impression the correct one? Or are we dealing with the incorrigible disposition of man to glorify the past? To the majority of people their youth was an era of stronger, braver men, more wholesome, beautiful women. People were better, times were more natural, and there is a grim satisfaction in predicting that the "world is going to the dogs." "The good old days" has been the cry of man from the very earliest times.

Yet read what a contemporary of the housewife of three quarters of a century ago says,—the wisest, wittiest, sanest doctor of the day, Oliver Wendell Holmes. The genial autocrat of the breakfast table observes: "Talk about military duty! What is that to the warfare of a married maid of all work, with the title of mistress and an American female constitution which collapses just in the middle third of life, comes out vulcanized India rubber, if it happens to live through the period when health and strength are most wanted?"

And then, if one looks in the advertisements of half a century ago, one finds the nostrum dealer loudly proclaiming his capacity to cure what is evidently the Nervous Housewife. In America at least she has always existed, perhaps in lesser numbers than at present. And one remembers in a dim sort of way that the married woman of olden days was altogether faded at thirty-five, that she entered on middle life at a time when at least many of our women of to-day still think themselves young.

It becomes interesting and necessary at this point to trace the evolution of the home, because this is to trace the evolution of our housewife. We are apt to think of the home

as originating in a sort of cave, where the little unit—the Man, the Woman, and the Children—dwelt in isolation, ever on the watch against marauders, either animal or human. In this cave the woman was the chattel of man; he had seized her by force and ruled by force.

Perhaps there was such a stage, but much more likely the home was a communal residence, where the man-herd, the group, the clan, the Family in the larger sense dwelt. Only a large group would be safe, and the strong social instinct, the herd feeling, was the basis of the home. Here the men and women dwelt in a promiscuity that through the ages went through an evolution which finally became the father-controlled monogamy of to-day. Here the women lived; here they span, sewed, built; here they started the arts, the handicrafts, and the religions. And from here the men went forth to fish and hunt and fight, grim males to whom a maiden was a thing to court and a wife a thing to enslave.

Just how the home became more and more segregated and the family life more individualized is not in the province of this book to detail. This is certain: that the home was not only a place where man and woman mated, where their children were born and reared, where food was prepared and cooked, and where shelter from the elements was obtained; it was also the first great workshop, where all the manifold industries had their inception and early development. The housewife was then not only mother, wife, cook, and nurse; she was the spinner, the weaver, the tanner, the dyer, the brewer, the druggist.

Even in the high civilization of the Jews this wide scope of the housewife prevailed. Read what the wisest, perhaps because most married, of men says:

She seeketh wool and flax,
And worketh willingly with her hands.
She is like the merchant ships;
She bringeth her food from afar.
She considereth a field, and buyeth it.
With the fruit of her hands she planteth a
vineyard.
She girdeth her loins with strength,
And maketh strong her arms.
She perceiveth that her merchandise is good.
Her lamp goeth not out by night.
She layeth her hands to the distaff
And her hands hold the spindle.

* * * * *

She is not afraid of the snow for her household:
For all her household are clothed with scarlet.
She maketh for herself coverlets,
She maketh linen garments and selleth them,
And delivereth girdles unto the merchants.

No wonder "her children rise up and call her blessed" and it is somewhat condescending of her husband when he "praiseth her." All we learn of him is that he "is known in the gates when he sitteth among the elders of the land." With a wife like her, this was all he had to do.

This combination of industrialism and domesticity continued until gradually men stepped into the field of work,

perhaps as a result of their wives' example, and became farmers on a larger scale, merchants of a wider scope, artisans, handicraftsmen, guild members of a more developed technique. Woman started these things in the home or near it; man, through his restless energy, specialized and thus developed an intenser civilization. But even up till the nineteenth century woman carried on all her occupations at the home, which still continued to be workshop and hearth.

Then man invented the machine, harnessed steam, wired electricity, and there was born the Factory, the specialized house of industry, in which there works no artisan, only factory hands. The home could not compete with this man's monster, into which flowed one river of raw material and out of which poured another of finished products. But not only did the factory dye, weave, spin, tan, etc.; it also invaded the innermost sphere of woman's work. For her loaf of bread it turned out thousands, until finally she is beginning to give up baking; for her hit-or-miss jellies, preserves, jams, it invented scientific canning with absolute methods, handy forms, tempting flavors. And canning did not stop there; meats, soups, vegetables, fruits are now placed in the hands of the housewife "Ready to Serve," until the cynical now state, "Woman is no longer a cook, she is a can opener." With all the talk in this modern time of women invading man's field, it is just to remark that man has stepped into woman's work and carried off a huge part of it to his own creation, the factory.

Thus it has come to pass that in our day the housewife does but little dyeing, spinning, weaving, is no longer a

handicraftsman, and in addition is turning over a large part of her food preparation and cooking to the factory.

But the factory is not content with thus disarranging the ancient scheme of things by invading the housewife's province; it has dragged a large number of women, yearly increasing in number and proportion, into industry. Thus it has made this condition of affairs: that it takes the young girl from the home for the few years that intervene before her marriage. She is thus initiated into wage-earning before she becomes a man's wife, the housewife.

This industrial period of a girl's life is important psychologically, for it profoundly influences her reaction to her status and work as homekeeper.

Of even greater importance to our study than the influence of the factory is the rise of what is known as feminism. Of all the living creatures in the world the female of the human species has been the most downtrodden, for to every wretched class of man there was a still inferior, more wretched group, their wives. She was a slave to the slaves, a dependent of the abjectly poor. When men passed through the stage where woman's life might be taken at a whim, she remained a creature without rights of the wider kind. Men debated whether she had a soul, made cynical proverbs about her, called her the "weaker vessel," and debarred her from political and economic equality, classing her up to this very moment in rights with the idiot, the imbecile, and the criminal. Worse than this, they gave her a spurious homage, created a lop-sided chivalry, and caused her to accept as her ideal goal of womanhood the achievement of beauty and the entrance into wifedom.

After they tied her hand and foot with restrictions and belittling ideals, they capped the climax by calling her weak and petty by nature and even got her to believe it!

It is not my intention to trace the rise of feminism. Brave women arose from age to age to glorify the world and their sex, and men here and there championed them. Man started to emancipate himself from slavery, and noble ideals of the equality of mankind first were whispered, then shouted as battle cries, and finally chiseled with enduring letters into the foundations of States. "But if all this was good for men, why not for women—why should they be fettered by illiteracy, pettiness, dependence; why should they be voiceless in the state and world?" So asked the feminists. The factory called for women as labor; they became the clerks, the teachers, the typists, the nurses. Medicine and the law opened their doors, at least in part. And now we are on the verge of universal suffrage, with women entering into the affairs of the world, theoretically at least the equals of man.

But with the entrance of woman into many varied professions and occupations, with a wider access to experience and knowledge, arose what may be called the era of the "individualization of woman." For if any group of people are kept under more or less uniform conditions in early life, if one goal is held out as the only legitimate aim and end, in a word, if their training and purposes are made alike, they become alike and individuality never develops. With individuality comes rebellion at old-established conditions, dissatisfaction, discontent, and especially if the old ideal still remains in force. This new type of woman is

not so well fitted for the old type of marriage as her predecessors. There arises a group of consequences based psychologically on this, a fact which we shall find of great importance later on.

Women still regard marriage as their chief goal in life, still enter homes, still bear children, and take their husband's name. But having become more individualized they demand more definite individual treatment and rebel more at what they consider an infringement of their rights as human beings. Also, and unfortunately, they still wish the right to be whimsical, they continue to reserve for themselves the weapons of tears, reproaches, and unreasonable demands. This has brought about the divorce evil.

Briefly the "divorce" evil arises first from the rebellion of woman against marital drunkenness, unfaithfulness, neglect, brutality that a former generation of wives tolerated and even expected. Second, it arises from a conflict between the institution of marriage which still carries with it the chattel idea—that woman is property—and a generation of women that does not accept this. Third, it arises from the ill-balanced demands of women to be treated as equals and also as irresponsible, petty, and indulged tyrants. Men are unable to adjust themselves to the shattering of the romantic ideal, and the home disintegrates. Though divorce is the top of the crest of marital unhappiness, it really represents only the extreme cases, and behind it is a huge body of quarreling and divided homes.

We shall later see that our Nervous Housewife has symptoms and pains and aches and changes in mood and

feeling that are born of the conflict that is in part pictured by divorce. *Divorce is a manifestation of the discontent of women, and so is the nervousness of the housewife.*

There arises as a result of this individualization of woman, as a result of increasing physiological knowledge, the hugely important fact of restricted child bearing. The woman will no longer bear children indiscriminately,—and the large family is soon to be a thing of the past in America and in all the civilized world. The-woman-that-knows-how shrinks from the long nine months of pregnancy, the agony of the birth, and the weary restricted months of nursing. Had the woman of a past time known how, she too would have refused to bear. In this the housewife of to-day is seconded by her husband, for where he has sympathy for his wife he prefers to let her decide the number of children, and also he is impressed by the high cost of rearing them.

One gets cynical about the influence of church, patriotism, and press when one sees how the housewife has disregarded these influences. For all the religions preach that race suicide is a sin, all the statesmen point out that only decadent nations restrict families, and all or nearly all the press thunder against it. It is even against the law for a physician or other person to instruct in the methods of birth restriction, and yet—the birth rate steadily drops. An immigrant mother has six, eight, or ten children and her daughter has one, two, or three, very rarely more, and often enough none. This is true even of races close to religious teaching, such as the Irish Catholic and the Jew.

One can well be cynical of the power of religion and teaching and law when one finds that even the families of

ministers, rabbis, editors, and lawmakers, all of whom stand publicly for natural birth, have shown a great reduction in their size, that has taken place in a single generation.

Is the modern woman more susceptible to the effects of pregnancy,—less resistant to the strain of childbearing and childbirth? It is a quite general impression amongst obstetricians that this is a fact and also that fewer women are able to nurse their babies. If so, these phenomena are of the highest importance to the race and likewise to the problem of the new housewife. For we shall learn that the lowering of energy is both a cause and symptom of her neuroses.

If then we summarize what has been thus far outlined, we find two currents in the evolution of the housewife. *First*, she has yielded a large part of her work to the factory, practically all of that part of it which is industrial and a considerable portion of the food preparation.

Second, there has been a rise in the dignity and position of woman in the past one hundred and fifty years which has had many results. She has considerably widened the scope of her experience with life through work in the factory, in the office, in the schoolhouse, and in the professions. This has changed her attitude toward her original occupation of housewife and is a psychological fact of great importance. She has become more industrial and individualized, and as a result has declined to live in unsatisfactory relations with man, so that divorce has become more frequent. In part this is also caused by her inability to give up petty irresponsibility while claiming equality. Finally, the declining birth rate is still further evidence of her individualization and

is in a sense her denial of mere femaleness and an affirmation of freedom.



CHAPTER II

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THE NATURE OF "NERVOUSNESS"

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Preliminary to our discussion of the nervousness of the housewife we must take up without great regard to details the subject of nervousness in general.

Nervousness, like many another word of common speech, has no place whatever in medicine. Indeed, no term indicating an abnormal condition is so loosely used as this one.

People say a man is nervous when they mean he is subject to attacks of anger, an emotional state. Likewise he is nervous when he is a victim of fear, a state literally the opposite of the first. Or, if he is restless, is given to little tricks like pulling at his hair, or biting his nails, he is nervous. The mother excuses her spoiled child on the ground of his nervousness, and I have seen a thoroughly bad boy who branded his baby sister with a heated spoon called "nervous." A "nervous breakdown" is a familiar verbal disguise for one or other of the sinister faces of insanity itself.

It should be made clear that what we are dealing with in the nervous housewife is not a special form of nervous disorder. It conforms to the general types found in single women and also in men. It differs in the intensity of symptoms, in the way they group themselves, and in the causes.

Physicians use the term psychoneuroses to include a group of nervous disorders of so-called functional nature. That is to say, there is no alteration that can be found in the brain, the spinal cord, or any part of the nervous system. In this, these conditions differ from such diseases as locomotor ataxia, tumor of the brain, cerebral hemorrhage, etc., because there are marked changes in the structure in the latter troubles. One might compare the psychoneuroses to a watch which needed oiling or cleaning, or merely a winding up,—as against one in which a vital part was broken.

The most important of the psychoneuroses, in so far as the housewife is concerned, is the condition called neurasthenia, although two other diseases, psychasthenia and hysteria, are of importance.

It is interesting that neurasthenia is considered by many physicians as a disease of modern times. Indeed, it was first described in 1869 by the eminent neurologist Beard, who thought it was entirely caused by the stress and strain of American life. That not only America, but every part of the whole civilized world has its neurasthenia is now an accepted fact. Knowing what we do of its causes we infer that it is probably as old as mankind; but there exists no reasonable doubt that modern life, with its hurry, its tensions, its widespread and ever present excitement, has increased the proportion of people involved.

Particularly the increase in the size and number of the cities, as compared with the country, is a great factor in the spread of neurasthenia. Then, too, the introduction of so-called time-saving, *i.e.* distance-annihilating instruments, such as the telephone, telegraph, railroad, etc., have acted

not so much to save time as to increase the number of things done, seen, and heard. The busy man with his telephone close at hand may be saving time on each transaction, but by enormously increasing the number of his transactions he is not saving *himself*.

The keynote of neurasthenia is *increased liability to fatigue*. The tired feeling that comes on with a minimum of exertion, worse on arising than on going to bed, is its distinguishing mark. Sleep, which should remove the fatigue of the day, does not; the victim takes half of his day to get going; and at night, when he should have the delicious drowsiness of bedtime, he is wide-awake and disinclined to go to bed or sleep. This fatigue enters into all functions of the mind and body. Fatigue of mind brings about lack of concentration, an inattention; and this brings about an inefficiency that worries the patient beyond words as portending a mental breakdown. Fatigue of purpose brings a listlessness of effort, a shirking of the strenuous, the more distressing because the victim is often enough an idealist with over-lofty purposes. Fatigue of mood is marked by depression of a mild kind, a liability to worry, an unenthusiasm for those one loves or for the things formerly held dearest. And finally the fatigue is often marked by a lack of control over the emotional expression, so that anger blazes forth more easily over trifles, and the tears come upon even a slight vexation. *To be neurasthenic is to magnify the pins and pricks of life into calamities, and to be the victim of an abnormal state that is neither health nor disease.*