

# Shell-Shocked in the Great Battle of Life

## Mental Disorders Are Often the Result of a Desire to Get Away From the Struggle of Existence

By EDWARD J. BECK

**I**S everybody more or less insane? What distinguishes a crazy person from one who is normal? These questions I put to a medical friend of mine who is a specialist on mental diseases and the fame of whose competence attracts patients from several states. "Your question is about as easy to answer as 'How high is up?' or 'How long is a string?'"

"It is impossible to give a clear-cut definition of insanity. The border line between mental disorder and actual insanity is often indistinguishable. Just as we have colds, chills and headaches without cataloging ourselves as invalids, so we may be haunted by some obsession or compulsion or be subject to absent-mindedness or forgetfulness without making the term 'crazy' rightly applicable to us.

"What are brains for anyhow? The answer is 'to enable the individual to adjust himself as a whole to his environment.' Insanity is the lack of capacity for efficient adjustment.

"The normal mind, for example, correctly pictures the outside world. It mirrors the environment as it is—it does not habitually see things which are not there nor habitually misinterpret the impressions furnished by the senses."

"The mind relates us to the world of our physical environment; it chooses our vocation; it earns our living; it adjusts us to frictionless relations with our fellows.

"When the mind loses the very capacity to adjust its possessor to the world of the senses, the workaday world or the social world; when it fails to perform its most essential and valuable function, so that the individual becomes a menace to his own interest or a danger to society, then we call the disorder insanity."

### Brave Soldiers Were Victims

**L**OOKING through the literature I found no more useful explanation than this—for practical purposes at least—though the diagnostician has more precise criteria for identifying insanity. Life is a battle, a struggle for life, power and happiness and in the harshness and tumult of the fight, cases of mental abnormality develop very much like the shell-shock of which we heard so much during the war.

During the war, whole hospitals were filled with soldiers who had been shell-shocked; they had lost sight, hearing or memory in some mysterious manner though their seeing and hearing apparatus were unimpaired. The victims of the derangement were often the strongest and bravest men in their units—not nervous weaklings nor cowering sissies.

Psychologists attributed their condition to the suppression of the instinct of flight and its accompanying emotion—fear. The brave soldier did not distinguish between fear and cowardice; one seemed as despicable to him as the other; he dismissed fear from his mind as a sign of weakness instead of regarding it as an inevitable and instinctive reaction to the dangers of modern, large-scale warfare. He had no consciousness of fear but fear was there just the same—hidden unrecognized in the subconscious mind.

In the unconscious mind was a desire to escape, an urging to flight that was strong enough to produce blindness and deafness. The instinctive self reasoned thus: "When I am blind, I am incapacitated. I can go to the rear—so I'll be blind." The bravest soldier could be made a victim of a part of his personality which was deeper-seated than will power or habit. The cure came when that same primitive self was made aware that the war was over and the danger past—though this reassurance was often difficult to transmit except by hypnotic suggestion or a shock of some kind.

### Tracing the Cause

**I**T IS the desire to flee from the battle of existence and to evade unpleasant reality that causes the shell-shock in the battle of life. The same sort of refusal to face facts which caused blindness on the battlefield, produces disintegration of the personality, mental disorder and milder forms of mental disturbance in times of peace.

A hidden conflict between instinct and reason; between desire and conscience; between things as they are and as we would like them to be, causes those eccentricities and derangements which are manifested in varying degrees in everyone and which furnishes some justification for the uncritical dictum that everyone is more or less crazy.

A news item from the daily press offers a typical illustration of how suppressed desires may manifest themselves in grotesque form.

The society columns of Atlanta newspapers announced the engagement of a music teacher whom I shall call Miss Jones to a Dr. Alleyne Hensley, of Quebec, Canada. Two years previously, Miss Jones had been a patient at Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, and on her return home she informed her family and friends that the physician who had performed her operation had fallen in love with her and had asked her to marry him.

Wedding invitations were mailed out and published notices went so far as to give the details of the forth-

coming wedding, stating that the eleven-year-old daughter of Dr. Hensley would be a flower girl.

Miss Jones left Atlanta about the time the engagement was announced saying that she was going to New York to purchase her trousseau. A little later, relatives received a message saying that Dr. Hensley had been badly injured in a train wreck. Another message from Chicago said that he had died before she arrived and that she was bringing the body to Atlanta for burial.

The Atlanta undertaker was doubtful that the body could have been that of a surgeon; it seemed more like the remains of a laborer. The funeral, which was set for a Thursday, was postponed until the family had time to investigate.

Then Miss Jones confessed the truth. There had never been any Dr. Hensley; the letters and presents she had received during the courtship had been ingeniously sent by herself to herself. The body was that of an unidentified tramp who had been killed by a train in the Chicago railroad yards.

Miss Jones had appeared at the office of a Chicago undertaking firm which takes care of burials in potter's field and said she was looking for the body of her husband—Dr. Hensley. When the body of the tramp was shown her, she identified the remains as those of her husband and made arrangements for shipping the body to Atlanta.

The deputy coroner in Chicago said: "She wept incessantly while giving the statement and I never for a minute suspected it was anything but a bona fide identification."

This is an illustration of the results of conflict between a strong mating instinct plus a desire for social recognition, with the cruel facts of life. Condemned by circumstances to celibacy, the unconscious mind would not be denied the fulfillment of its wish, and not finding realization in actual life possible, it found satisfaction at first probably in romantic phantasies or daydreams and later in the elaborate and cleverly-planned fiction told above.

The psychologists tell us that most of the functional mental disorders and many peculiar physical manifestations such as twitchings, stuttering, many cases of skin eruption, even some cases of paralysis, blindness and deafness may be attributed to inner conflict between hidden desires on the one hand and conscience, pride or fear of social disapproval on the other. Or the present condition may be traced back to some shock in childhood or to a submerged discord of personality which had its origin in the faulty handling of the child by its parents. Eccentricities, obsessions and delusions are often derived from the same causes.

### Man's Double Nature

**T**O UNDERSTAND abnormalities of this kind, we must recognize that man has a double nature. First, he has the conscious mind with which he thinks and reasons, and then also an unconscious self, the savage and the baby in him which never grows up. When he is born he comes to the world with a ready-made outfit of instincts—the same equipment which nature gives every infant whether born in the jungles or on Fifth Avenue. Our natures are not modernized. This out-of-date self is the oldest and most deep-seated part of us and the standards of adult life are simply a surface veneer.

Infancy is a care-free time of complete satisfaction in the mother's arms. The baby is just an animated stomach. His is a blissful existence of feeding and sleeping. Everything comes easy—all that is needed to fill a want is a cry.

Conflict begins when the child learns that there are others to be considered also and that the heart's desires do not materialize automatically.

Parents may handle their children wrongly in two different ways and render them susceptible to later mental disorder: they may spoil them or they may bully them.

A child may be so sheltered from unpleasantness and pampered that a mama's darling results. Or it may be capriciously knocked around, denied any understanding of its whims and cowed by parental tyranny. In the latter instance, an inferiority complex may be built up which may end in some form of mental disorder.

Mrs. Smith was a chronic invalid. She had consulted many doctors and lived in numerous sanitariums, all to no avail. Her medical advisers all told her there was nothing organically wrong. The latest specialist happened to be a psycho-analyst and went on the theory that the trouble was caused by some repressed craving. He analyzed Mrs. Smith's dreams to obtain clues as to the nature of the suppressed wish.

"Madame, you wish you were back with your father in the golden days of childhood," said the doctor. "When you fell and hurt yourself your father always petted you and kissed away the pain. As an only daughter, you had too much affection lavished upon you."

"Your husband, though considerate and attentive to your wants, is reserved and withholds the tender-

nesses of the lover. Your submerged infantile nature yearns for loving attention and to get it, lays you up in bed, because then he must minister to you."

This revelation brought the conflict to the surface and as soon as Mrs. Smith recognized the true state of things, the symptoms left her. Her husband was coached as to the attitude he should take and Mrs. Smith is now a new woman.

A bookkeeper for a wholesale hardware company suffered from writers' cramp and finally felt himself compelled to give up his position. One of the fortunes of the town had been made in the manufacture of cough drops and so the young man decided that he also would acquire wealth by making cough drops.

The young man was undersized in stature and rather chubby-faced. At school he had been taunted about his size and bullied by the other boys. To compensate for his feeling of inferiority, he found satisfaction in the thought that physically he resembled Napoleon. A picture of Napoleon hung on the wall and on the mantle stood a bust of the "Little Corporal." The young man thought of himself vaguely as a coming Napoleon of finance.

He left a few cartons of cough drops with druggists whom he knew and traveled around the country "promoting sales." When the consignments were returned as unsatisfactory because the spring heat caused them to melt into a solid mass, the young man was not dismayed. His identification with the conquering Napoleon and his dreams of wealth warped his judgment and rendered him incapable of seeing the true state of things. When all his savings had been consumed by futile business trips, his dream structure collapsed.

### Restoring the Bookkeeper's Balance

**T**HE physician who was treating him for writers' cramp decided that something more than liniment and massage was needed to render him capable of resuming his old occupation of keeping books. He delved into the young man's history and laid bare the hidden motives which explained both the writers' cramp and his dream of empire. The former was caused by his aversion to routine work and the detestation of his position of inferiority at the hardware company. The latter was an example of self-protective delusion whereby a painful complex which is repressed manifests itself in consciousness by an exaggerated development of its opposite. The physician suggested that the young man act as a boy scout leader, thus giving him the satisfaction of superiority and leadership. The bookkeeping is also bearable now, the writers' cramp has disappeared and the young man's reactions to life are normal—because the analysis ended the conflict.

The natural result of craving and ambition is action which brings actual realization. In some cases where the world of reality thwarts realization, recourse is had to daydreaming and the desire of the heart is attained in agreeable mental pictures. Fame, love, money and success are enjoyed in imagination. Daydreaming is the refuge from reality.

William James called attention to the danger of becoming filled with emotions which prompt no deed and are not translated into action. Plays and concerts produce a sentimental effect. James says: "The remedy would be never to suffer oneself to have an emotion at a concert without expressing it afterward in some actual way. Let the expression be the least thing in the world—speaking genially to one's aunt or giving up one's seat in a horse car, if nothing more heroic offers—but let it not fail to take place."

### Both Kinds Are Preventable

**M**ENTAL disorder and life-shock are preventable through self-knowledge and candor. If we admit our brutish, uncivilized and childish proclivities to ourselves instead of repressing them; if we drag them out of the dark into the daylight, we abort mental trouble. If we acknowledge our limitations and face the demands of the world with deeds rather than excuses or delusions, we are sane. We must not fool ourselves by seeking the rewards of life in phantasy instead of winning them from an obstinate world by actual effort.

The National Committee for Mental Hygiene makes the following suggestions as essential in protecting the mental health of children:

Give your child opportunity for a variety of wholesome activities and interests.

Train your child to work hard in some regular occupation suited to his ability and talents but to avoid fatigue by alteration of work and rest.

Train your child to strict obedience in a few important matters and let him alone in regard to unimportant things.

Avoid conditions that tend to produce overstrain or precocity. The special business of a young child is to grow and play with other children.

Protect your child from shocks. Do not frighten him yourself nor let other people do so.

Take the advice of a competent person concerning the peculiar, sensitive or nervous child to correct a possibly bad inheritance by proper education and environment.