"NERVES" AND CITY CIVILIZATION.*

By Sir PHILIP GIBBS, K.B.E.

SOME of you may be wondering why a man who writes novels should be asked to make a speech on behalf of the Tavistock Square Clinic, and I must admit that I have been cudgelling my brains to find a satisfactory answer. The reason, however, is now clear to me. This Clinic, as you know, deals with functional nervous disorders. That also seems to be the province of the modern novelist, judging from the character of our library fiction. Some of these Constant Nymphs, these Lily Christines, the heroes and heroines of our Flaming Youth and Young Anarchy, are in urgent need of treatment by Dr. Crichton Miller and his colleagues. Readers of Mr. Michael Arlen and Mr. Aldous Huxley must imagine that passion of the most disordered kind is running riot in society and the suburbs, and that morals have been abandoned from Mayfair to Mitcham.

As a matter of fact the work of a novelist, if he takes himself seriously as an artist and a truth-teller, is in the same street as that of a psycho-analyst. He is a student of the human mind. He has to explore its secret corridors. He has to study the hidden motives of men and women and see their souls behind their masks. He must know them in their dreams. He is not shut out of their bedrooms when they lock the door and are left alone with themselves.

I rather fancy that we novelists deal with the same cases as come to Tavistock Square. They are, of course, not, as a rule, the nice, normal, healthy people who are adapting themselves to the conditions of life with courage and cheerfulness. People like that, of whom there are millions, wouldn't make a story, and they are not in need of psycho-therapy. No, the characters we choose are those who find life difficult, and who are maladjusted to the society in which they find themselves. It is not altogether the fault of the novelist if there is a sign of neurasthenia, a touch of hysteria sometimes, in modern fiction. Is there not a good deal of that in modern life, and is not that the reason why the Tavistock Square Clinic

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cannot cope with the work which crowds into its consulting-rooms?

Speaking as a novelist and a journalist, it seems to me that the whole world, as far as I know it, and especially perhaps this city of London, is suffering from functional nervous disorder—likely to be increased in gravity during the next few weeks by the emotional crisis of a general election! Take up one's daily paper and one is rather aghast at its picture of life—those young people who put their heads into gas ovens, those strangled sweethearts, those crimes of passion, those broken marriages and unhappy homes which are reported day by day in small print.

And the doctors of Tavistock Square know many other cases which never get into the papers—those young people who have got all wrong with life because of some mental maladjustment to their social conditions, business men who become nervous wrecks because of some lack of balance between body and mind, innumerable girls who develop some form of hysteria because of bewildered emotions and secret conflicts of the mind, unhappy husbands, unhappy wives, and all those little tragedies of life which are due to that modern malady which the layman calls "nerves."

It is the disease of civilization. It is perhaps the price we have to pay for civilization. The London sparrows don't suffer from functional nervous disorders, nor do the beasts of the field. And in the old days when men and women were close to the earth, earning their living by sweat of body and brow, hand in hand with Mother Nature, they were better adjusted, perhaps, to the natural conditions of life. We are less brutal, less cruel, less ignorant, but we are more sensitive, more highly strung, and therefore more quick to suffer. We have to pay the price for divorcing ourselves from the old earth, and from flowers and trees, and bodily labour, and handicraft. These marble columns, this excellent lunch, this city life, cost a great price in nervous strain.

It is a question to my mind whether this strain on the nerves of humanity is not getting too much for the ordinary brain and body. We have mechanized life without simplifying it. The machine hurls us faster from one place to another, but the mind has no stopping-place. As the pace of life increases, as ideas travel faster, the mind of man is invaded by new impressions, new excitements, new appeals to the senses, with which it can hardly keep pace, so that it becomes bewildered by all this racket. A walk through London to-day, a strap-hanging journey on the tubes, a venture across the "roundabout" of Trafalgar Square would upset the mental balance of Shakespeare if he revisited this earthly scene, and make a nervous wreck of the Iron Duke.

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But the mind of to-day is not only subject to these outward stresses and strains. It is tortured, or at least made anxious, by inner conflicts. The old primitive instincts of the cave man still lurk in the unconscious memories of the human race and have not been adjusted to the ideals of modern civilization—or the police-court code. The ignorance of parents and teachers still creates dark fears in the imagination of childhood. Some of the young people of to-day who have broken with tradition find themselves spiritually adrift on a sea of doubt. They are told not to do this and not to do that, but they do not recognize any authority why they should exercise such self-control or self-sacrifice. They only know that they "get it in the neck" from society if they break certain conventions which have no spiritual sanction in their own mind and no sincerity in the social code itself. It is all very bewildering, and sometimes leads to the mental hospital.

In this city civilization of ours there is a lack of balance between the mind and body and between the imagination and reality. There is also in this country a lack of balance between the sexes—too many girls and too few boys—at the very time when the passion of love and the allurement of sex are over-emphasized in every cinema and playhouse, and forced upon the imagination by a constant repetition of sensuous appeal. The picture-palaces are crowded by people who wish to escape from reality and the painful process of thinking, by husbands who cannot stay at home with their wives, by wives who are afraid of lonely hours with their own thoughts. Anything rather than think! Any dope as an anodyne to the torture of facing the facts of life! Because many people have no philosophy to reconcile themselves with this artificial civilization which they have built away from Nature, and no religion which gives them peace of mind in a world rushing about in the hope of finding happiness!

This Tavistock Square Clinic is an institution for teaching people how to get right with their minds. It is accumulating a stock of ever-increasing knowledge about the factors which make for mental disease. It is able to estimate the importance of the different stresses and strains of civilization, the faults of our system of education, the dangers of interference with the stability and order of family life, and its great importance is in the prevention rather than the cure of mental disorder. That surely is the most important need of the world to-day.

It is so important that there is no other branch of science or adventure of knowledge which offers such tremendous possibilities of improving the chances of human happiness. Because whatever new powers are put into the hands of humanity by physical science,

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they are worse than useless—they are indeed only destructive—if the human mind cannot control itself. It is of no use for a man to be able to fly to India in two days if at his journey's end he lands with the wrong thoughts in his head, nerve-racked or obsessed by some hysteria. The "talkies" may follow the "movies," and television may bring new pictures of life into the back parlour, but there will be no increase in the joy of life if people are making little hells in their own minds.

The Tavistock Square Clinic is not enough. There ought to be clinics of this kind, with Tavistock Square as a general headquarters, in every great city. They would be houses of rescue for those young people whose minds are not in tune with the realities of life. They would save those victims of an ill-balanced civilization who commit crimes because of some injustice or emotional weakness in early life. They would be laboratories of research revealing, as the investigations of medical psychologists have already revealed, the defects and dangers in the education of children who suffer many agonies and are ill-prepared for life because of the ignorance of parents and teachers. They would be, like this Tavistock Square Clinic, an observatory of the human mind, throwing new light into the dark passages of the unconscious, and helping us all to get free from that underworld of racial instincts, hidden fears and ill-balanced impulses which weaken us and drag us down. Above all, perhaps, they would teach us to get away from cruelty in our relations to our fellow men and women, and to have deeper sympathy and understanding and pity for all the children of life.

I have seen in the papers lately that a millionaire is offering a prize for advice on the best way by which he can give away two million pounds with the greatest advantage to humanity and the least harm. My own advice to him is to give every penny of it to the Tavistock Square Clinic!

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