

Marriage in Neurotic Subjects. By GEO. H. SAVAGE, M.D.,
Bethlem Hospital.*

I trust that my subject will be definite enough, and of sufficient interest to create a good discussion. It is one of such vital importance to society that we should endeavour to form very well defined opinions on it.

I find one set of physicians looking with horror upon the idea of anyone marrying who is markedly neurotic, whereas another class looks to marriage to cure nervous evils. I do not entirely agree with either of these, and, though I have no intention of trimming, I shall yet have to agree in part with each.

The first thing to be done is to divide the subject, and define my terms. By "neurotic" persons, I mean those who have suffered from insanity, epilepsy, or grave hysteria, and the near blood relations of such persons. This may be considered by some to embrace too large a field, and that it would be hard to know who would be allowed to marry at all; but later I shall point out that I, for one, would not make the question of marriage or non-marriage depend solely, or even chiefly, upon the existence of neurosis in a family. I am inclined to think that if it were possible for us to select those who are to be married, and if we selected only those who are nervously stable for the parents of the next generation, the children might suffer from a want of adaptability. They might, in fact, develop from nervous *stability* into nervous *rigidity*. But it is almost folly to make too much of the advice to be given in such cases. The few phlegmatic, reasonable people who would consult the physician before they became engaged to be married are very few compared with those who, impelled by passion, would marry first, and discover their error afterwards.

In considering somewhat in detail the relationships of marriage in the neurotic subject, we shall have to deal with its bearings on the contracting parties, and its relationship to their children. I am much more frequently asked by people about to marry, who consult me, what my opinion is in reference to their children, if they should have any; and a thoughtful man or woman will be much concerned with the possible inheritance

* Read at the Quarterly Meeting of the Medico-Psychological Association, held at Bethlem Hospital, February 21, 1883.

of trouble which may be transmitted by his or her conjugal partner.

In considering the effects of marriage upon the parents, one would prefer to consider the effect of marriage upon the various forms of neurosis that we have mentioned, and, to begin with the simplest:—Does marriage generally do good or harm in grave hysteria? The day is passing, if it be not already past, in which hysteria and ovarian disease are looked upon as interchangeable terms; that the adolescent of either sex, in developing sexual function, has to pass through a baptism of fire, I admit; but this disturbance, though associated with development of a new function, may really be as well marked along the nutritive or nervous lines as along the reproductive. A change is effected in the whole organism at this period, and the stress will probably fall most heavily upon the least stable part. It would be harmful, in my experience, if every young hysteric were then and there married. The relief, if any, would be but temporary, and the result to the developing organism would be disastrous. I do not believe myself that hysteria is *generally* benefited by marriage. Most of us have seen cases of severe hysteria occurring in married women. I have not had many opportunities of observing grave hysteria before marriage, and of seeing the same cases after they had been married and had children; but, though somewhat in opposition to the principle which I have laid down, I admit I have seen one such case, in which anorexia nervosa and extreme depression occurring in a young single girl passed off after marriage and the birth of children. On the other hand, I have seen several cases in which the hysterical girl has become the insane mother, and the hoped-for cure by marriage has proved a delusive dream.

After hysteria the relationships of hystero-epilepsy and hysteria to marriage are to be noted. I think no one would dream of recommending marriage in cases where epilepsy was undoubted, and fully developed, if contracting parties could be found foolish enough to enter into marriages with such patients; but on more than one occasion I have been asked my opinion in such a case as the following. A young woman, the daughter of a nervous mother, at about 18, being a large, massive, ill-regulated woman, developed some kind of convulsive fits. The fits occurred now and again, at night, were associated with loss of consciousness, a scream, and biting the tongue, so that the epilepsy was undoubted. Should this girl be encouraged to keep on an engagement into which

she had entered, or should she at once break it off? The fits had not been numerous, and seemed to vary directly with her physical condition, so that when she was in better general health she had none of them, but when she got below par they reappeared. But few fits altogether had occurred, and the lover was perfectly willing to go on with his engagement. Personally I was against the marriage, but it took place, and at all events up to two years afterwards there had been no recurrence of fits. This one case will not prove that it is good for epileptics to marry, but may point out the fact that certain unstable, nervous persons benefit by the development of their full animal natures. I should dread the effects of marriage upon an epileptic almost more than upon those who had been insane. The comparative rarity with which epileptics get well, and the mysterious causation of the whole epileptic condition, make it a dangerous experiment to recommend marriage for the relief of these unknown conditions. In speaking of the hysterical and their marriages one has said nothing about the possibility of the injury to the offspring, simply for want of facts to go upon, *i.e.*, *undoubted* facts. One has a vague and general idea that insane people seen in an asylum very frequently have hysterical relations, in fact, that there is a definite relation between hysteria and insanity, but if one were to attempt for a moment to prevent the hysterical from marrying, the world would become depopulated, at least of legitimate children. On the other hand, the relationship between epilepsy and insanity is very much more marked, and more fully established, so that an epileptic parent may, like Brown-Sequard's guinea-pigs, beget children who are epileptic, or insane even. Therefore, in speaking of marriage with epileptics, one has not only the hopelessness of cure, but the danger to the offspring to be considered. Next, and perhaps this is the question that will chiefly interest most of us:—Under what conditions are you to countenance marriage with either insane patients, patients who have been insane, or patients who have very strong nervous inheritance? To begin with, insane people have no right to marry. As we have before considered the relationship to divorce in such cases, I need not say any more. Next, as to those who have once been insane, the general public would say, of course, that they never ought to marry, not only because of their insanity, which the public still believes will necessarily return, but because it believes that an insane mother must have an insane child. Unfortunately, our general experience makes these two bold

propositions appear true. But before giving advice as to whether a patient should or should not marry after having had an attack of insanity, I think one should very definitely investigate the cause of the insanity and the nature of the attack, besides taking into consideration the nervous inheritance. Take an example. A man without any insane blood relations, having been exhausted by some strumous glands which had been discharging for a considerable time, is placed, socially, in circumstances leading to great depression. He was forced to live a subjective life. He was a highly trained man, had been imbued with extremely strict High-Church notions; thus suffering from an exhausting discharge, living a subjective life, and draining himself, as it were, of joy and healthy relaxation, the man became melancholy, with suicidal tendencies, and had to be placed in an asylum. After a time he got stronger, and as he got stronger he lost his depression, recovered his health completely, and was able to resume his occupation with complete satisfaction to himself and his clients. After keeping well for several years, he is told that his chances of sanity depend to a great extent upon his leading a more subjective and healthy life, and marriage is suggested to him. Before going further he determined to consult two or three doctors on the question, and here were several elements of confusion. Those who knew nothing about insanity at once advised him not to marry. Those who knew more about the subject advised him to marry, after having definitely told his history to any person whom he intended to make his wife. In this case there was no inheritance. The causation of the mental depression was traceable to physical weakness. The man had not only recovered, but had been enabled to follow his old occupation as well as ever before, so that there was complete restoration; and I can see no reason why that man should not stand as good a chance of keeping well as the majority of men. One question quite apart from the medical aspect of the case would have to be considered—that there are marriages and marriages, so that if you could ensure the prospect of comfort, that is, if you were able to see that the selected companion was suitable as far as years and means were concerned, the chances of maintenance of health would be greater than if there were great disparity of years and a certainty of poverty and anxiety to contend against. As I told this gentleman, when he anxiously asked about the possibility of any offspring being insane, such authorities as Dr. Maudsley said there would be more chance of genius for

his offspring than there would be for the offspring of those who had never suffered from any nervous disorder. Incidentally, I would here refer to conjugal frauds. Some would say, let the danger be kept for the parents alone; let means be taken to prevent offspring of the marriage of neurotic subjects. I myself should strongly oppose such measures, unless the patient had had several attacks of insanity, or unless there were already at least two children of the marriage. Most of us know the unsatisfactory nervous state seen in women of the middle and upper middle classes especially, who have no children. Whether it be their fault or the fault of their husbands, both suffer severely in mind and temper. Thus, as one is in the habit of seeing, the sexual function is the function which develops altruism, so without children the parents become egotistical, and egotism and insanity are not far apart.

Several other points have to be considered: for instance, the forms of insanity, and their relationships to inheritance and to recurrence. One would say to a person asking whether she might marry, "If you have strong insane inheritance, and if you have had already one attack occurring at about 20, more especially if there had been a tendency to hysteria or other emotional disturbance, you will marry at very great risk of breaking down after childbirth, and your future partner must be fully warned of this fact;" whereas if the insanity has been more accidental, if I may use the term, more the result of some other physical cause, the chances of recurrence are less, and your advice may be given in accordance with that experience. I am afraid, however, none of us are in a position to say what cases will or will not recur.

Another point is when a patient may be married, that is, how soon after an attack of insanity. Most of us have seen cases in which the insane inheritance has been transmitted directly, and, if I may say so, immediately. I have seen three or four cases in which children have been begotten by insane parents who were suffering from acute insanity at the time of their begetting. Such persons are almost sure to be weak-minded, idiotic, or imbecile from birth. On the other hand, the greater distance there is between the attack and the begetting of the child, the less danger is there to the offspring. I am in the habit of saying that a general paralytic father rarely begets an insane child, unless that child is begotten during the active stage of the disease. I would even go further, and say that I have seen cases of inheritance in which the inherit-

ance has been in distinct relationship to an injury to the head, that a child begotten by the father a short time after a severe concussion of the brain, had been the only one who developed incurable insanity, the child next begotten being nervous and hysterical, and the rest of the children being perfectly natural. The point, then, upon which I would insist, is that the danger to the offspring is directly in relationship to the active insanity itself—that a parent who has been insane may beget an insane child soon after recovery, before the attack or during the attack of insanity, but that he may beget perfectly sane children in the interval. I suppose most of you will ask, who is to judge as to when the chance of getting insane children is past? and I am afraid I am not in a position to make any definite answer. Collaterally, one would also say that marriage may have a dangerous effect upon a person of nervous inheritance. Every now and again one sees such persons upset by the shock of marriage itself, and each year one has one or more cases of so-called post-connubial insanity. The dangers, then, to neurotic subjects in marriage are that they may develop insanity, they may develop hysteria, they may develop epilepsy as a result of the marriage. They may develop insanity after child-birth, or, if children are prevented, they still may develop nervous symptoms; and even though the marriage may be put off till past the child-bearing period, yet the patients are not safe from attacks of nervous disease.

To sum up the whole matter, one would say that marriage will relieve a certain number of hysterical cases, and that it is justifiable in a certain number of cases who have suffered from insanity. I should never advise marriage as a cure for hysteria without warning the friends that it might or might not be beneficial; and that the good depends not only on the marriage, but upon so many other circumstances. I should not oppose every marriage of those who have been insane, provided, only one of the contracting parties had been so, and the other was of good physical health and not of nervous disposition.