

"*Forgetting.*"⁽¹⁾ By C. DAVIES-JONES, M.B., Ch.B.Edin., Ashhurst Hospital, Littlemore, Oxford.

I HAVE taken as my title for this short paper the word "Forgetting." But I think it would be well to explain that I do not think it would be satisfactory to attempt to touch upon all forms of forgetting in the time allotted to me. I shall, therefore, not enter at all into the question of the more serious and complete amnesias such as are met with in the practice of psycho-analysis. Such amnesias are brought about by mental traumata, which then result in a dissociation of the painful memory from consciousness. They are more grave in their nature and formation than the cases of "forgetting" to which I wish to confine myself.

Prof. Freud, of Vienna, claims that forgetting, whether it be in relation to words or deeds, is not a mere fortuitous occurrence incapable of rational explanation. However trivial it may be, a reason for its production can generally be found by psycho-analytic methods. Sometimes it may be so insignificant as to call for no attention; on the other hand, an apparently trivial amnesia may prove to have in its origin material of great importance. One means of gauging the importance or value of an amnesia is the emotional affect accompanying it. If, in other words, the subject experiences mental pain or distress in connection with the forgetting or the attempt to remember, then we can generally take it that the condition merits investigation.

Numerous instances are forthcoming, I venture to submit, of things forgotten in the every-day lives of all of us. By this I do not refer to those instances where the subject forgotten has failed to make a sufficient impression upon the memory to achieve its retention. Such cases are met with normally in states of preoccupation, and only differ in degree from those found in cases of confusion and states of anxiety. It is rather with the type of forgetting in which the impression has been made but where a bar to its revival has been introduced that I am going to deal.

Sometimes we find ourselves forgetting things we feel that we should not forget, or perhaps we experience that tantalising sensation of having a word on the tip of the tongue. All of these conditions are capable of examination, and to those who wish to take anything of the nature of an active interest in psycho-analysis useful opportunities for exercise in the method are thereby afforded. It is with regard to the forgetting in the psycho-pathology of every-day

⁽¹⁾ A paper read at the Quarterly Meeting held in London, November 22nd, 1921. For discussion *vide* pp. 104-6.

life that I wish to bring to your notice two instances which I hope may prove interesting. Before doing so, I feel that it would be well to outline as briefly as possible one or two details.

This form of forgetting is an active process ; we forget because we do not wish to remember. It would therefore be expected that we should wish to forget what is unpleasant or what clashes with our innate tendencies. This is a broad statement, but it is borne out in practice, though at times the " wish " is somewhat difficult to discover.

In forgetting, an active force is brought to bear—*i.e.*, the unpleasant element is repressed or pushed away into oblivion. Every time that a resuscitation of the painful memory occurs, or is likely to occur, an attempt is made to thwart its expression. Eventually the repression will become a part of the unconscious itself. It will cease to find its outlet by being remembered. Nevertheless it has a latent energy which can never be destroyed. Expression in consciousness will be found in some way or other—most frequently by routes so devious that the patient is unable to discern for himself whence the trouble arises, and yet feels a sense of dissatisfaction frequently amounting to great distress in relation thereto. If we trace back step by step by the psycho-analytic method, one will arrive at this source once more—it can be brought to consciousness, and a new and better adjustment made for the condition causing trouble.

Freud employs the method of free association to achieve this. The person under examination is instructed to say freely whatever comes into his mind without let or hindrance. The analyst will collect this information and prevent the patient from leaving the main channel, etc. In the two instances I now quote I hope you will be able to see more clearly what I have in mind.

In the first instance the name of one's servant is forgotten on every occasion when one has need to use it. The name is discovered to be Dean, and the fact that it has been habitually forgotten is excluded. Free association leads on as follows :

Dean—the Dien in Ich Dien—I serve—to serve the mass at Church—the words the " Sacrifice of the Mass "—something given up or taken away—a loss—the attaché case lost off the Maltese cart at Menin—Dean was responsible for packing the cart, through his negligence the case was lost. Dean did not serve well by losing it—its contents were of great sentimental value to the owner. He must not be reminded of the loss ; he must forget all that reminds him, incidentally Dean.

The second instance is somewhat more intricate.

A friend of mine forgot for two hours how to tie his necktie one morning. At this time he was the transport officer in the battalion and wore a stock. I allowed him to go on talking, and it was as

well that I did, for a curious *lapsus linguæ* helped to connect up his associations later. He said the following :

“ After trying I went and had my dinner—I mean breakfast.” It was evident that the word “ dinner ” was what one calls a complex indicator. I inquired whether he slept well or had any dreams. His reply was, “ I never dream ; when I go to bed I die till the morning.” Then, as an afterthought, “ Of course I sleep ; I don’t die.” This last utterance led me to ask him to associate upon death. He said that death reminded him of his brother’s death which had just recently occurred. The news created a very profound impression upon him. He thought of the Christmas and New Year’s dinners his family kept during his brother’s lifetime ; then of the fact that his family were congratulating themselves by a toast at dinner over the fact that all the boys were safe when the news of the brother’s death arrived, changing their joy to sorrow. His brother’s kit arrives home in driblets, keeping the wound open. Then in a flash he remembers that on the previous morning he had had half a mind to wear an ordinary stiff khaki collar. He was fitting a tie into it when he noticed his brother’s name marked on the collar.

Memories flooded to his mind of the day some time ago when his brother, home on leave with him, was getting rid of collars and gave him these. My friend spoke as follows, showing another *lapsus* :

“ He was hunting through his ties and gave me fifteen or more ties, all different shapes and sizes, saying, ‘ Here, old chap, you can have these ties.’ ” I then remarked to him, “ But wasn’t it collars ? ” He replied, “ Of course—I’ve got ties on the brain this morning.” We then proceeded a little further, and he remembered that he finally decided not to put on the collar because it reminded him of his brother’s death.

We are now in a position to sum up.

To wear his brother’s collar needs an unusual tie. This means that he must exercise care in tying it. Moreover, to wear the collar recalls his brother’s death, which is a painful memory. Next morning he forgets how to tie a tie at all, so that the collar used may not remind him of his sorrow. The effect at repression was unsuccessful, however, as he suffered great distress.

Before I end I ought to say that the analysis brought much more to light out of this apparently trivial matter. The dead brother, for instance, was the youngest—the baby of the family. “ He even couldn’t tie his tie,” said my friend, and, in following this train, we discovered that the wish was not only to forget the death, but to replace the dead brother ; to do so it became necessary to be unable to tie one’s tie.

(For the discussion which followed see pp. 104-6.)